



Books by the Same Author

DIAMOND LIL

THE CONSTANT SINNER

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*Goodness Had Nothing to Do
With It*



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Goodness

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The Autobiography of

MAE WEST

*Had Nothing to Do
With It*

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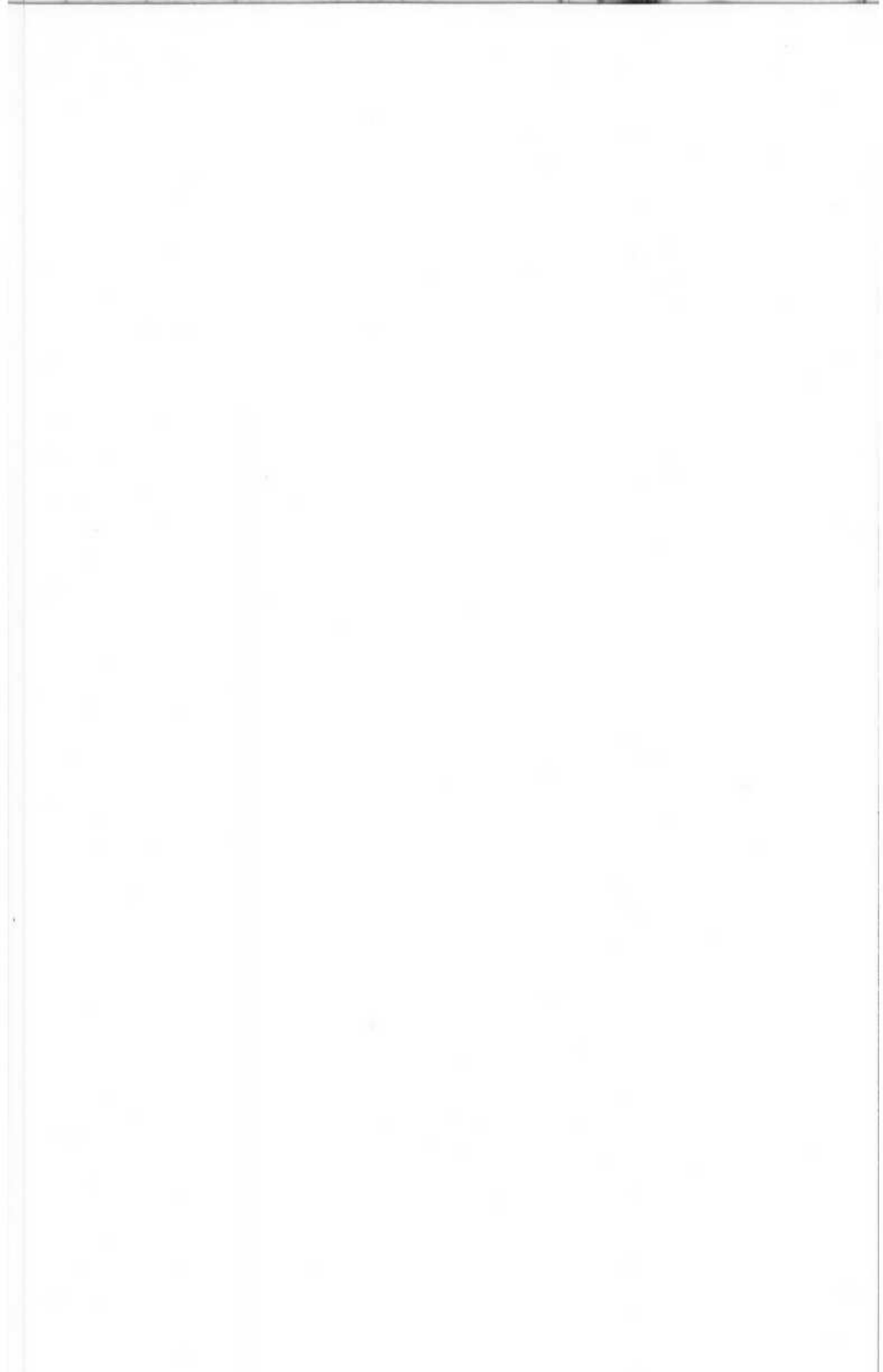
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In loving memory of my
MOTHER
without whom I might have been
somebody else



Acknowledgment

A BOOK about one's life necessarily demands a tremendous amount of recollection and research, and I have never kept a diary. I once told an interviewer that if I ever kept a diary it would have to be written in invisible ink.

Mention must be made of my dear friends and business associates, Murray Fall and James J. Geller, who finally persuaded me to set down the events of my life.

Many of my records preserved through the years were hopelessly ruined in the storage room of my apartment building in Hollywood during the "unusual" floods of 1933-1935. My important papers, copyright cards, and family photos stored there could not be replaced.

I am, therefore, appreciative of the assistance given me by Larry Lee, my longtime associate, in recalling to me many of the names, dates, places and events which I have recorded in this autobiography.

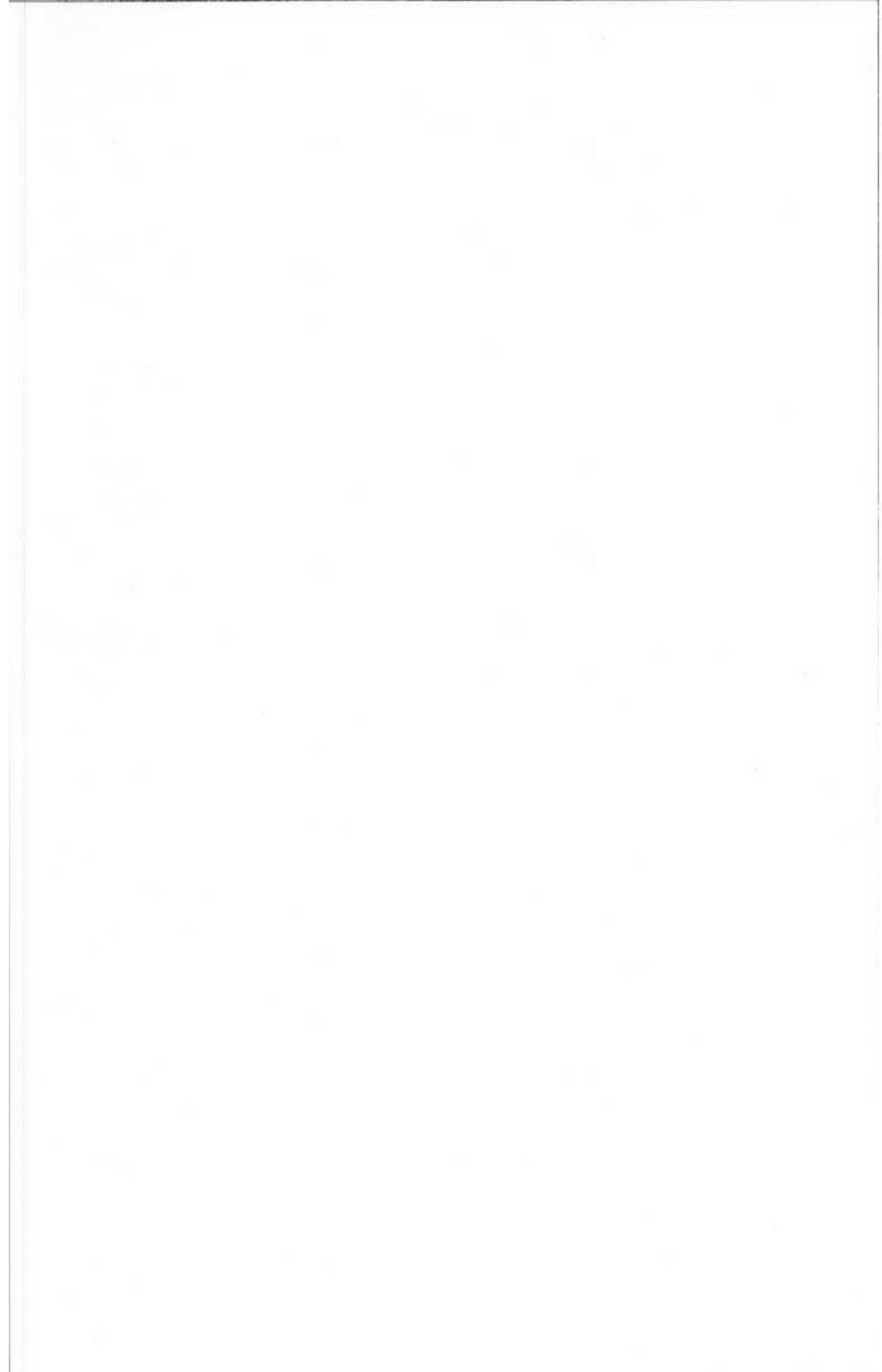
I also wish to thank Criswell for the hours and days he spent in research, exploring library records and newspaper files for factual information and data concerning my life not easily obtainable otherwise.

My sincere thanks, too, are given to Dolly Lyons Dempsey, long my devoted fan and friend, for the reference use of her many scrapbooks in which she has collected published material about me since 1935.

I owe special thanks to Stephen Longstreet for his editorial assistance.

—M. W.

Hollywood, California



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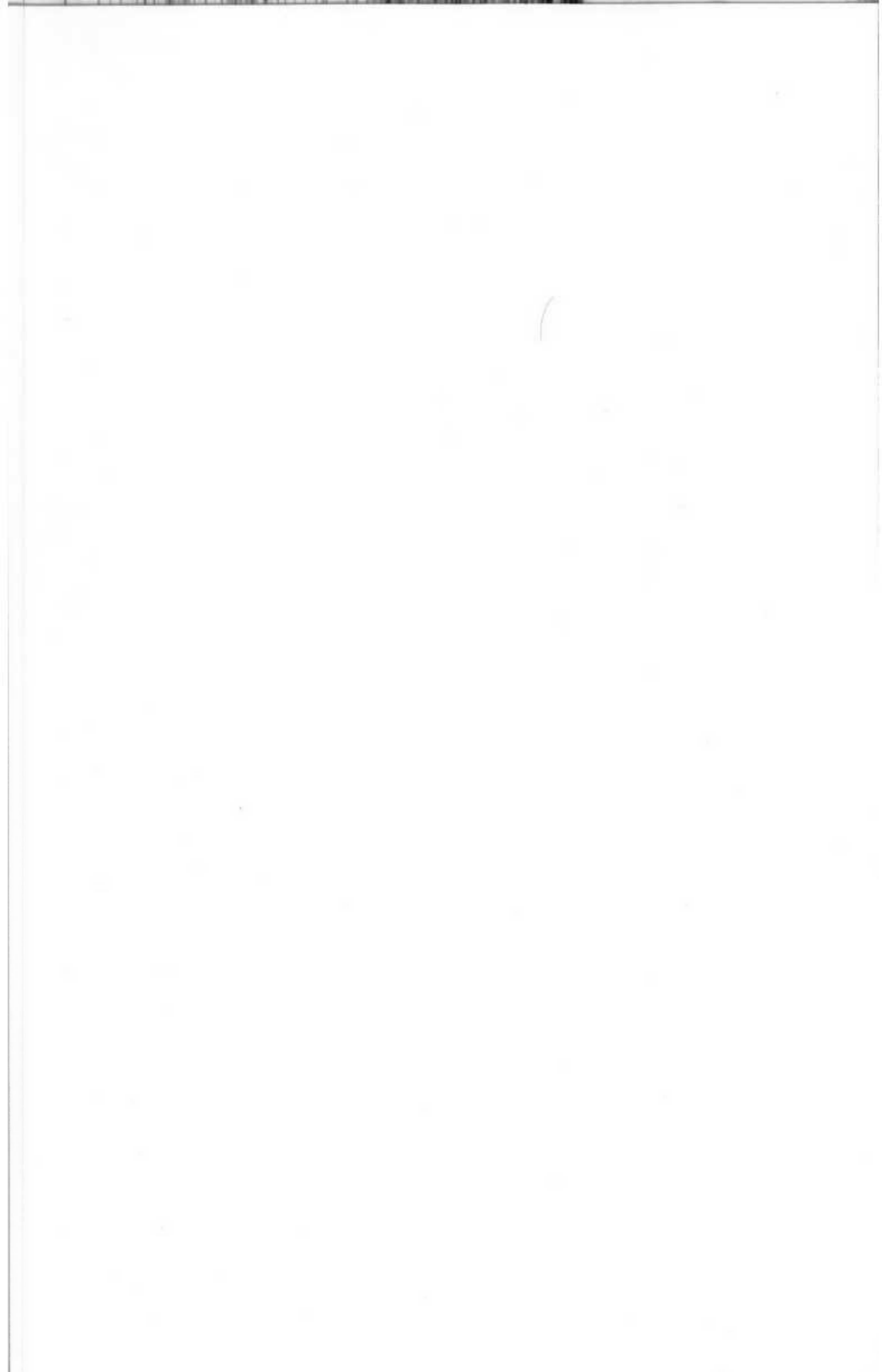
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*Goodness Had Nothing to Do
With It*





I



I Take the Spotlight



THE BROOKLYN I was born in, near the end of the 19th century, was still a city of churches, with their great bronze bells walloping calls to the faithful from early dawn, and a city of waterfront dives where the old forest of the spars of sailing ships was rapidly being replaced by funnels and the Sand Street Navy Yard already had a reputation for girl chasers. Gentlemen, and deer, ran wild in Prospect Park.

I was born into a world of much more sunlight and less smoke than now, a world of ringing horse cars, ragtime music, cakewalks and Floradora Sextets, and a sense that the coming new century would be the biggest and the best. The final score is not yet in, but I think this one will make it among the centuries to treasure.

Brooklyn was a city of neat horse-plagued, tree-lined streets, connected by a brand new bridge to Manhattan. Men of affairs, business and otherwise, still drove a pair of horses in a fancy rig, and while manly beards were still in fashion, the well dressed

man-about-town was already waxing the ends of his English Guardsman's mustaches and learning to point them with a twist of his ruby-cuff-linked wrist.

There were Brooklyn picnics in the many groves of oak and elm that still existed, and the great iron-wheeled beer drays pulled by four to six large-rumped horses in their polished harnesses were a sight to cheer. There was a fine theatre audience—high and low. Girls in tights, and girls without them, and the rag-time beat and the first stirrings of jazz from faraway Storyville were already coming out of the places soon to use Mr. Edison's new electric-light signs. The sports were beginning to appear in the first of the horseless carriages. The lobster palaces, high button shoes, popular hook-and-ladder fire companies were the things that gave a man standing in his community. I was a child of the new century just around the corner, and I ran towards it boldly.

I was born on a respectable street in Brooklyn on the 17th of August, 1893. I am of English, Irish and German extraction, which means the usual European intermixture of many unknown genes that keeps people lively.

My father, John West, was of English and Irish descent, a tough chip-on-the-shoulder lover of fun and fights. His father was also a John West who came from a long line of John Wests originally from Long Grendon, Buckinghamshire, England. The first John West in America came over in the 1700's.

My father's mother, Mary Jane Copley, was Irish, and came to this country at an early age. She was related to the well-known Copleys of Boston and Pittsburgh.

Unlike his brothers, who went through college, my father, a wild, laughing man, preferred a life of banging physical action. When he married my mother he was known as "Battling Jack West, Champion of Brooklyn, New York."

My father was an epic figure in Brooklyn. I remember all the stories about him: the gay time when he was courting my mother,

and had taken her to a social club outing. He had resented the attentions a club member paid her. A fight started and my father, all knobby with muscles, knocked the rival out with one punch. The club members, a hundred angry men, ganged up on him. Father, in a savage rage, knocked two glass beer mugs together and with the jagged remains cut and slashed his way through the fray, leaving a bloody mob.

Father once captured two robbers single-handed. He was very strong. He had been a catch-as-catch-can street fighter, and had fought in the ring since he was eleven years old. He said that at that age he'd rather fight than eat. He was always ready to do physical violence when the urge was on him.

After he was married he gave up his fighting career and became a business man. There was a power and a vitality about Mother that made a man melt before her glance.

Father established a livery stable business of carriages, surreys and coaches for hire, and maintained horse stands for business or pleasure during the summer at different beach resorts. In the winter he also had horsedrawn sleighs, complete with jingle bells.

It was a prosperous business until automobiles became popular, after which time my father became a private detective and established a detective agency. He developed a night alarm system for the protection of stores and warehouses, which were being frequently burglarized by thieves whom the police force could not catch. Later he went into real estate.

My mother, Matilda Delker Doelger, was born in Bavaria, Germany, in a town near the elf-filled Black Forest. She came to this country in 1882, along with her three sisters and two brothers. Her father, Jacob Doelger, was a first cousin of Peter Doelger, founder of the New York breweries bearing his name. My grandfather, before coming to America with his family, had been a chemical engineer in a sugar refinery in Württemberg. There he married my grandmother, Christina Mosha.

My mother and I always had a carriage available, and in the winter a deep fur-lined sleigh. I came to the luxury of comfort and fur early. The winters seemed to be more severe than now, and since there was no modern equipment for clearing snow away, winters were white for a long time. Motor cars were few and complicated; horsedrawn sleighs fashionable. In season, open barouches, landaus and surreys carried off the gay ladies to fashionable Coney Island for soft-shell crabs and hot corn, and sin.

When Father got a new carriage, Mother and I were the first test riders. Father made a living for us—but Mama added the color and style.

Mother said I was a rather unusual child: "A child that has to be humored and can't be forced or ordered. She resents even an unfavorable tone of voice."

"I know that," Papa would say. "I'll watch my tones."

Mama was wary of my observation of all the relatives, friends, or other people who came to the house. After they left, I commented about them, criticizing or praising them, depending on how they impressed me.

My father would say, "Well, I wish I could know as much about the people who hire my rigs."

I was four when Mama wanted to have my picture taken. I had seen a dog I liked very much. I told Mama, "I'd like to have my picture taken with a dog."

"What dog, dear?"

"The dog around the corner."

One of Papa's brothers happened to be there and Mama sent him out to "borrow" the dog. "Good thing she didn't see an elephant."

He spent the morning bringing in dogs, but none was the right one. "A dog is a dog," he said.

But I wasn't taking just any dog (just as later I never took just

any diamond). "No, my dog has long white hair with one black ear and a black eye."

My uncle went out again on a frantic search. It got to be early afternoon, but I absolutely refused to go to the photographer without the dog. "No dog, no picture."

"Here comes Uncle now," said Mama.

He had the right canine. I was delighted. We drove to the photographer's in our carriage. The dog barked, jumped out and ran away. My uncle chased after him, shouting.

After some delay, during which Mother and I waited and the photographer grew restless, my uncle came in with the dog. Both were hot and panting, and my uncle's trousers were torn. The picture was taken.

A little later Mama took me to Batterman's department store on Broadway, to buy a doll. At the counter they had twenty-five dolls on display, identical in every way except for color of hair. The one that took my fancy was not among them. It sat high and lonely like a cloud up on a top shelf near the ceiling. It had blonde hair and fascinating blue eyes, and was the only one dressed in satin of a shade between pink and lilac.

Being exclusive even then, I said, "That one. Only that one."

There didn't seem to be anyone handy to climb up and get that doll.

My mother then offered me a more expensive doll.

I insisted: "*That* one."

Mama got the saleslady to summon a couple of male employees with a huge ladder. While one held the ladder, the other climbed to the extreme top shelf to fetch that particular doll. During all this time many of the store's customers had curiously gathered around to watch what was happening—all this embarrassment to my mother caused by a four-year-old with a strong little mind of her own.

Much later my mother learned that the reason for my choice

was that that color lilac was my favorite. It still is to this day.

Another time Mother took me for tea to some elderly spinster friends of hers. Before tea was served, I went over to look at a glass dome covering a bouquet of wool flowers.

"Don't touch that, little girl," said one of the spinsters quite sharply.

I drew back in anger and contempt, went to my mother, whose back was turned to the incident, and insisted that we leave at once. No pleading, no cajoling, no apologies from the spinster, who sensed the unspoken reason for my mood, could deflect me. We went home without the refreshments that were temptingly offered to me.

Now I believe Mother was wise in going along with my determined wishes. Probably she realized that opposing me would get her nowhere and would merely exhaust both of us emotionally.

At any rate, I was completely devoted to my mother. She tried in every way to understand me, and she succeeded. It was this deep, loving understanding as long as she lived that more than anything else helped and sustained me on my way to success.

Matilda Doelger West was a beautiful, charming and refined woman with a figure so perfect that before her marriage she had been a corset and fashion model. This experience had given her great poise and grace. In addition she was soft-spoken, and had a manner that was formal but never stiff.

She loved pretty things about her. The parlor of our three-story brownstone house was furnished with good, and some fine, pieces upholstered in pastel shades of turquoise, peach and yellow. A round rug of the same colors covered the floor, and there were airy lace curtains at the long windows. In an age of dark rooms and even darker decoration, our house was unique for its light and color. Mother dressed me in dainty light clothes and fabrics, much like the clothes she herself wore. She made these herself, having studied fashion design to become a *modiste*.

For a time it looked as if I might be an only child. Then, when I was four months past five, my sister Beverly made her appearance, and a year later my brother John Edwin. They were both beautiful babies; I loved them dearly. But they were different from me in that they suffered through the customary childhood illnesses, whereas I was phenomenally healthy. As a matter of fact, I have never had anything more serious than a cold.

I never minded losing my mother's exclusive attention. I had already been concentrating on myself, developing my own personality, and becoming more and more interested in the stage. I have always been too busy with my own affairs to be envious of anyone.

Let go of the things that can't possibly matter to you, and you'll always have room for the better things that come along. I learned early that two and two are four, and five will get you ten if you know how to work it.

Personality is the most important thing to an actress's success. You can sing like Flagstad or dance like Pavlova or act like Bernhardt, but if you haven't personality you will never be a real star. Personality is the glitter that sends your little gleam across the footlights and the orchestra pit into that big black space where the audience is.

Personality is what you as an individual radiate. It's a combination of your thoughts and the way you express them. A person with a great personality never has to act, he just does what he feels. All the training you may get will simply teach you how to express what you feel.

It's love, too—love and respect for yourself first, then logically for others.

All my concentrating on personality and my efforts to develop it got put to a test when I was seven years old, going on eight, and went to "Professor" Watts' dancing school on Fulton Street,

Brooklyn, New York. In those days they called any man who was a card sharp, or a teacher of anything, "Professor."

After two weeks at his studio I had impressed him enough for him to put me on at a Sunday concert at the Royal Theatre, which was also on Fulton Street in Brooklyn. This theatre played vaudeville shows, but on this Sunday night it was sold out to the Elks, who put on their own show consisting of amateur talent and relatives in addition to the regular vaudeville acts. It was a large theatre with two balconies and boxes, and had a twelve-piece orchestra. It was there I made my debut, on my first real stage, and I loved it. It was my first romance.

I was terribly excited about the chance to show my little dances and songs in a big theatre, with a big orchestra, big stage, big audience—and best of all to me, a big spotlight. The rest of America could ask for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; I'd take the spotlight. I saw it used in the vaudeville acts that preceded me. I simply had to have it on me. At the proper church affairs and socials where I had entertained they'd never had such a thing. I went to the stage manager. "I have to have a spotlight."

"All right, you'll get one."

I told him at least ten times, even though he agreed each time that I'd get it. I had to be sure. (All my life, casual appearing as I am, I've always double-checked and triple-checked everything.)

Mother was backstage with me, rather worried as to how I would do, this being my first time in a big theatre with a large orchestra.

"You've only sung and danced to a piano, or with no piano."

I said, "You're more nervous than I am."

I was thrilled and anxious to get out there on that stage—in a spotlight. Who had time to feel upset or nervous? All I was thinking about was what I was going to do when I got out there.

Papa had been talking to Mama about me. I didn't know until later that Father had told her, "Tonight is the test for Mae.

If she gets stagefright I don't think it would be advisable for her to continue with a stage career."

Papa sat out front, watching. In the dark wings offstage right, I waited, eager, poised, to make my entrance. The act before me had used the spot and when they went off on the other side of the stage, the spotlight stayed there. It picked up the man who came on and announced my act: "Baby Mae—Song and Dance." The spotlight followed him off-stage.

The orchestra played my introduction of some dance of spring. Then another. I was supposed to go out on the second introduction. But the spotlight didn't move onto me and I waited. It was dark out there except for the spotlight on the other side. The band played two more introductions. I still waited. I was furious. I shouted, "*Where is my spotlight?!?*"

A stagehand said, "Walk out, Baby Mae. He'll see you and move the spot on you."

"He'd better. My father is Battling Jack."

I stepped out on the stage, looked up angrily at the spotlight man in the balcony, stamping my foot. "*Where is my spotlight!*" I stamped it again and the spotlight moved across stage onto me and caught me in the act of demanding my light. The audience saw me and laughed and applauded. The angry expression on my little face as I impudently stared up at the spotlight man, and my exasperated stamping of dancing shoes, explained my delayed entrance. Anyway, they seemed to think my song and my little tiptoeing dance were cute.

I wore a pink and green satin dress with gold spangles, and a large white lace picture hat with pink buds and pink satin ribbons, the buds' leaves matched the green of the dress, and pink kid slippers and pink stockings, bought at a costumer's, as mother was too busy with my sister and brother to make my costume.

With the spotlight on my shoulders like white mink, I went to center stage and sang my song, "Movin' Day." I did my skirt

dance without missing a word or a step. Instead of having stage-fright I was innocently brazen. My angry mood overcame any nervous doubts I might normally have felt. I've never had stage-fright in my life.

I was a hit with the audience. They were fine in their applause. I received a gold medal from the Elks organization. Papa was proud.

After that, Papa was outvoted and I was set for the stage and only the stage. I went on a few more amateur night performances. Father was feeling better about my stage appearances. He insisted on taking me to the theatres himself.

At amateur night performances I usually got the first prize of \$10. I rocked audiences with such songs as "Movin' Day," "Doin' the Grizzly Bear" and "My Mariooch-a Make-a da Hoochy-macooch," a comic dialect song.

I had a deep, rough voice for a child. The audience started laughing when they heard my first powerful tones. After my song I'd do a tap dance routine flavored with my own individual mannerisms of body movements and gestures. It was a new and different kind of personality in a child—one that was sure—and they liked it.

One amateur night appearance was in a theatre where the audience were in the gay habit of throwing silver coins and wadded bills onto the stage as an expression of their approval. When this money was thrown at me, I let it lay. Two friends of Papa's had to come out and take up the money for me in their derby hats. They held a lot, but I managed to half fill them.

Father said to Mother, "What's the matter that Mae won't even pick up the money they throw her? It's an insult to the audience."

"Mae just doesn't like to pick up things. She won't even pick up her own clothes. Money is no different to her."

"Mae should at least acknowledge the money to the audience. She could have picked up one of the bills as a favor. She turns up her nose at it as if they're insulting *her*."

"I'll speak to her."

I said to Papa, "I won't go on stage if I have to pick up the money."

"Now don't be rash, Mae. Of course you'll go on with your stage work."

So there was poor Papa who had tried to keep me off the stage begging me to please go on. "Even if my friends have to wear out their derbies to pick up the cash tossed at you."

"I'll buy them new derbies," I said.

2



A World by the Tail



AT THE AGE of seven I liked walking down the stage alley—new to me—to the big tin-covered stage door. And I inhaled like sacred odors the smell of the stage with its flying canvas drops and its tall wings and the footlights and the network of ropes overhead.

Out front there was the audience. I became aware early of audiences, and while I projected toward the men and boys, I would take a bow and cheer from the ladies and girls.

Mama, on these magic nights, would have my muff and my scarf, and Papa would be carrying my makeup, costume changes and dance shoes in a leather grip. I would share a room with the other amateurs, but already I secretly felt myself out of their class. Soon I'd be twelve, then fourteen, and at sixteen I fully expected to be a star.

"If they could bottle nerve," Papa said, "she'd have more than Rockefeller has oil."

I would stand in the wings watching the orchestra take its cues from the great star acts; for Joe Jackson on his trick bicycle, or Billie Burke taking a flier in vaudeville, or the senior Tyrone

Power in a bit of imported English drawing-room drama. I laughed with the Yiddish, Dutch and Italian comics. I listened, all ears, to the patter of the song and dance men in natty suits, with straw hats and limber canes, taking a soft shoe dance into a song about Bill Bailey, all the time smiling and gracefully twisting legs and arms as they told the latest nifty.

"You ought to be on the stage. And it leaves in ten minutes. *Yak yak!*"

"I wish I owned half of your hound dog. I'd shoot my half. *Yak yak!*"

Men already attracted me, and the song and dance men were the wittiest, best dressed and most amusing people on earth as far as I was concerned.

When the professionals were finished on the stage, there was a chord of horn music and a roll of the snare drum, and the manager would step out, wiping his face with a large silk handkerchief, and announce to cheers and cat-calls: "And now we have these talented amateur performers with us tonight. Tell 'em they're welcome by a nice big hand, and show yer generosity by yer offerings tossed at them. . . ."

I appeared at an amateur night at the Gotham Theatre in East New York—Brooklyn. It was usually occupied by a very popular dramatic stock company, and amateurs went on after the Saturday night show. There were three prizes: \$10.00, \$5.00 and \$3.00. I won first prize, by this time a habit with me. But my amateur standing was irking me.

Hal Clarendon, handsome leading man and a fine actor, owned the stock company and produced and directed its shows. He, with his wife, had watched the amateurs perform from one of the boxes. They came backstage and wanted to meet "Mae West, the little girl who had won first prize." They also shook hands with father, well known as an ex-fighter. "Everybody's so famous," said the actor.

"Well," I said, "I only do this for practice."

"How would you like to come with us?"

My eyes lit up. The Clarendons really wanted to put me in their stock company for training. Many of the plays Hal Clarendon produced had good child parts. I accepted—even before Papa did it for me. In addition, I was also to appear in dramatic plays and sketches that Alvin Reynolds put on with other stock companies. I first received \$18.00, then \$25.00, then \$30.00 a week. Most of the plays had been famous.

There were some weeks I didn't work, when the current play didn't have a child part, and then I studied the other performers. It was in these stock companies that I received my proper training in both dramatic and comedy parts. I learned theatre. I stored away stage directions, dramatic effect, and what audience reactions were at all times. I was fortunate in getting the right start, where everything was right for me. So I didn't have to learn the wrong way or the hard way. There is nothing wrong with learning or coming up the hard way, of course, except that you make a lot of mistakes before you learn the right way.

Already I had acquired the manner of speaking that has become identified with me. It came from my refusing to say certain words. My mother would have to try as many synonyms as she could think of before I would respond to one that took my fancy. For example, out of "bag," "valise," "suitcase," "grip" and "port-manteau," I would chose the one that sounded best to me. I liked the long words. There was a rhythm in their many syllables, and I would pronounce them slowly to savor their swing. That is why I was later able to make such a word as "fas-cin-a-tin'" acquire an individual connotation. Also I liked to reverse natural word order to get a better rhythm into my speech.

I ain't afraid of pushin' grammar around so long as it sounds good.

I played from the age of eight to eleven the moonshiner's daughter in grim dramas of the Kentucky hills. I stopped the express train with an oil lamp when the bridge was washed out.

I was the poor little white slave in Chinatown. I went looking at night between the swinging doors for my drunken stage father. I helped Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl protect her virtue, even if a little pleasant loose living would have turned that dismal drudge into a butterfly at Delmonico's, set in precious stones and up to her little sable muff in bonds and gilt-edge stocks.

We also did Shakespeare's roaring plays and while I looked good in doublet and tights in the woodland scenes, I decided the Bard was not for me. I liked something stronger than "odds bodkins" and "prithee, kind maid." I was too young to play Doll Tearsheets properly, and the great plays were mostly used by actors to overact, wave daggers and chew out the big scenes in the style of a man fighting off a beehive.

English drawing-room dramas and comedies were popular, all about lost heirs, lost virtue, schoolboys in love with their aunts, seduced barmaids, and old lords killed in locked rooms. The Derby was fixed, the Lord had a French bastard, the castle was haunted, and there was often a madwoman locked in a tower or a debt of honor to be paid in girl flesh.

The French sent over some interesting items with too many bedrooms and doors leading to closets. But they were rewritten for Brooklyn taste, even if the French got a reputation for bedroom habits little better than a mink's. There were sassy things with music in which any excuse to get the girl into tights and drawers was all right, if they showed their lacy *derrières*. Murder, rape (done offstage of course), forest fires, wrecks of famous river boats, crooked jockeys, and forged wills also served us.

It was all good theatre in the sense that it was tested and liked. We played it earnestly and swiftly, and we did what we could to learn our parts better and make our acting say more than the lines could. No actress ever had a better school.

I naturally had to have some other schooling and most of it was by private tutor. I also had a French teacher who owed Papa for horses. I did attend two public schools in Brooklyn, but only

for a very short time since the stage took up most of my time. My formal schooling went on until I was thirteen, at which point I felt I had an education.

I played with stock companies until I was eleven. By then I had outgrown child parts. I was at that in-between age, already a woman to look at and yet needing a little more filling out to put it over.

From twelve until fourteen when I wasn't working too steadily on the stage, I had more time on my hands. Boys seemed the answer. Mother permitted me to be out at night until ten o'clock. And I always went with the boys. Girls seemed a foolish investment of my time and boys could hold me up as I skated or assist me down from trolleys or wipe off park benches with their caps. They had such nice hard biceps too.

I already at twelve preferred male company, even if it were still in a glandular change-over full of fear and cracked voices. There were always five or six open-mouthed boys with whom I roller-skated on the park walks and in the winter sleighed on the high streets. Evenings the gang would gather at someone's house, the six boys and I, with perhaps another girl. We'd sit close together, sing, talk and enjoy ourselves. This included catch-as-catch-can kissing. I was quite impartial. I liked all the boys, and kissed them all, comparing styles and timing.

These delightful sensual sessions went on in dark parlors for quite some time. One Sunday morning there was a bit of trouble about it. I was particularly angry at Father that morning first because he had gotten the funnies. I loved Happy Hooligan, Little Nemo, and The Katzenjammers. It made me mad when he did that.

For some time I had become conscious of a growing resentment in me toward Father, but I didn't know the reason for it. I was crazy about Mother, but I found myself not liking my father, and

Freud wasn't there to explain it to me. I didn't want him to touch me. I didn't want to be in the same room with him. So that Sunday morning after the kissing party of the night before, through the open door of my bedroom I watched my father reading the funnies I wanted in the dining room.

Presently, we had a visitor. A little cousin of mine, aged six, came into the dining room and taking the center of the floor, parroted a little piece at my father. A sneaky little piece.

"My mother says my sister can't play with Cousin Mae, because Mae stays out late at night and Mae plays with the boys."

"What's that?" my father said. "What about Mae?" He tossed the funnies aside, jumped up. He yelled for Mother. "*What* is going on? What is this about Mae being out late at night with boys?"

"Don't get excited about it. I allow her to stay out until ten or ten-thirty. Yes, she does play with boys. But Mae always tells me where she is and who she is with. They are nice boys."

"Oh are they?"

"Please—not so loud."

"We'll see what this is about." Quickly putting on his hat and coat, he stormed out of the house to go and question my aunt about the situation.

He was in a terrible temper. It worried me. There was no telling what he would be told and how he would take it. I hadn't done anything really wrong, but I did feel a twinge of guilt about the warm, damp kissing. Papa had never laid a finger on me to chastise me, but I figured there could always be a first time for everything.

He was never in any way unkind to us, and never laid a punishing hand on any of his children, but we were aware Father had a quick and rather awesome temper. In fact, only recently he had beat up the Iron Man of Dutchtown, known as a magnificent cop fighter, a terror in his own right; beat him so terribly

that the man had to have thirty-two stitches taken in his iron head.

I disliked Father first because of cigars. All my life I have been allergic to cigars. The smell of a cigar live or cold twenty or thirty feet away can make me feel extremely uncomfortable and ready to scalp strangers. It makes no difference how expensive or how cheap the Havana is. A Corona-Corona offends me as deeply as the cheapest stogie.

Poor Father always had a cigar in his mouth, and when he removed it to kiss me, I felt an impulse to pull away from him. The first thing he did every day after coming home, or after dinner, was to light a long black cigar. I had to get out of the room and count ten several times to keep from shouting at him.

It has been my fate all through my career that I have been surrounded by cigar smokers, especially business associates—agents, bookers, manager, producers, stagehands, and passing males. In self-defense, and at the risk of seeming fanatic about it, I have had to insist that they all park their cigars outside my door or go away by themselves.

I slipped out of my room after Father left to hunt up my sins, knowing that was where he would surely look for me when he came back. I went into his room. I saw an iron curtain rod standing against the wall. Without a thought of the consequences or what my intended action might lead to, I took up the heavy iron rod—so heavy I was just able to swing it—and stood waiting.

If he had come in I would have let him have it. But when he came back he went into the dining room, sat down and began reading the funnies again. The Katzenjammer Kids always killed him.

Mama asked, "Well, what's the report on Mae?"

"Mae shouldn't be out that late at night."

"Oh, go back to your funnies. All the fuss and nothing wrong."

Besides the funnies, I followed eagerly the news of the vaudeville headliners and those I thought would soon be headliners. It

was a wonderful world of vaudeville and everyone in the family liked it and supported it. I saw all I could.

Julian Eltinge was the great female impersonator, even doing Salome's dance and not getting hissed or driven off the stage for it. Joe Cook was a cocky young guy advertising, I saw in the tradepapers, "unicycling and ragtime piano"; and there was Jimmy Savo, "juggler." I remember the first great Negro star, Bert Williams, who got away from the razor and fried chicken school of darky comedy, and was the first Negro to work with an all-white cast. A fine artist, he later went into the *Ziegfeld Folies*. Fatty Arbuckle had an act, but all I remember of him was the fact that he endorsed Murad cigarettes.

Prices of admission were twenty-five, fifty and seventy-five cents for the best shows, and there were two thousand theatres in America that played nothing but vaudeville. I figured out it would take me six years just to play each one once. There was small-time and big-time vaudeville, but every vaudeville actor felt the only difference was in the breaks.

Among the big feature acts was Evelyn Nesbit, whose husband, Harry Thaw, had just shot her lover, Stanford White, on a roof garden. Everyone went to see Evelyn on stage. Murderesses (found not guilty) were also stellar attractions for a while, and one female killer who was fired after one week asked, "What can I do to get back on?" The manager said, deadpan, "Go out and kill somebody else."

Annette Kellerman, in her one-piece bathing suit, with real water on the stage, showed off her figure. Gertrude Hoffman and Eva Tanguay were both doing Salome dances, but after the sixth veil fell the patrons whistled for more and didn't get it. Not in family type vaudeville.

I had a cousin, Marie Ellmore, who was already in show business, having ignored her family and done what she wanted. She was Father's niece. Professionally, she used the stage name Marie DeVere, as a show girl and actress in sketches.

Marie also posed as one of the "sisters" in advertising the Seven Sutherland Sisters Hair Tonic, a very popular item of the period. Marie had a luxuriant head of hair. Hers reached to her ankles. Her two sisters also had a great wealth of hair. Since they were now displaying it professionally, Harriet let her hair grow down to her knees. Edith grew hers to her waistline.

Marie later appeared in Ziegfeld shows, and for two years she was in *The Beauty and the Beast*. She played in other musical shows on Broadway and the road, but it was her talent and not her hair that got her work.

There was a good deal of entertainment talent on both sides of the family, though most of it was not used professionally. There were good singing voices among all of us, and my cousins Christina and Emma were both accomplished pianists. Emma's piano playing involved me once in a problem of truth or falsehood. I was roller-skating with some girls—the boys being at work at the time—in my neighborhood. We paused to rest and tighten our straps. One girl began bragging about what a wonderful piano player her cousin was. "My cousin has only been taking piano lessons for two years, and already she is playing such difficult pieces as Chopin and Mozart."

I said, "Oh, bushwah."

"Some of the music is so hard she has to cross one hand over the other when she plays it."

I was fed up with her cousin, *her* cousin, her *cousin!* I said, "That's small potatoes. My cousin Emma has only been taking piano lessons for two years, too, and she's got the hardest pieces to play you ever heard."

"What pieces are they?"

The only piece I could think of was the one I always wanted Emma to play for me: "The Storm" (my favorite, because it was exciting and loud).

"The Storm."

"Oh, my cousin plays 'The Storm' too," she said smugly.

I said, "One of my cousin Emma's pieces is so difficult she has to *play it with her knuckles*."

The little snip wanted to know the name of it. "I don't remember," I said, "but some great German composer wrote it."

That shut her up. She couldn't top that. And I skated away to meet my boys for a trip at dusk through the park paths before I could be cross-examined further. The next day the girl who thought her cousin was a world-beater went to see my cousin Emma and said, "I would like to hear you play the piece that you play with your knuckles."

"Whatever piece is that?" she asked.

"It's the one your Cousin Mae said you play with your knuckles."

"Oh, I'll talk to Mae and find out which one she meant."

I explained the situation to Emma and she got a big laugh out of it. "But what will I do if she asks me again?"

"Tell her you practiced the piece the day before and your knuckles are still sore."

And that's what she did. But she never tried to play a piece with her knuckles—she had no sense of showmanship.

I was fifteen and mature enough, I felt, to go back to the stage.

Kid acts were very popular. An actor named William Hogan was a good friend of the family. He was about thirty, and my parents liked him and felt that with him I would be in good hands. He did a sort of Huckleberry Finn characterization in his act, wearing a red wig and blacked-out teeth, and he was able to look, in a bad light, twelve years old. I was the girl friend—sun-bonnet, lace drawers and all—I screamed when he showed me his worm. Playing this act added a good deal to my experience in the theatre.

I returned from several weeks' work and found my brother

John ill with double pneumonia. He had a private nurse, Mrs. Schenck, a fine woman whom we all liked. She stayed at our home day and night and saw John through the crisis. When she was ready to leave us, her son called for her in his Model-T Ford to take her home.

"Well now, where have they been keeping you?" he asked me.

"Get in your tin can and roll," I said.

We both enjoyed the expected humor of the period. But at fifteen I wasn't letting a male's appearance escape me. Joe Schenck was a tall, handsome, blue-eyed, rather light (pardon my inventory) complexioned young man of about nineteen. We were, to put it in its mildest form, mutually attracted. He became my first boy friend with long trousers. And I saw the difference at once compared to skaters in knee pants.

Joe sent me flowers and called on me. He became "quite a steady beau," as Mother put it.

Joe was an excellent pianist, and he had a ragtime band. He made my kind of music in eighty-eight ways. On Saturday nights he brought his band up to our house. It consisted of six other good-looking young men, and I felt music was certainly a marvelous art and attracted such wonderful people.

The recurring pattern of multiple men in my life was already showing itself. I start with one, and usually five or six more put in an appearance. It's a satisfactory pattern. Getting down to your last man must be as bad as getting down to your last dollar.

Mother preferred that I divide my attention among several boys. She encouraged it. "I don't think, Mae, that you should become too serious, or go too steady, with any one boy in particular."

"Yes, Mama."

Joe and his band were always welcome at our house. I liked all of the boys, since each was a different type, and each had something of interest. As an actress I felt I had to know all about men, the wonderful monsters. Mother and Father enjoyed the

band sessions, and I took various boys around the house to show off our furniture. We had no etchings.

Sometimes I would sing with the band: "Beautiful Ohio," "Maple Leaf Rag," "Marie from Sunny Italy." It became a Saturday night event and went on for months.

Most of the boys in the band had other jobs, but Joe worked full time as a pianist. When he and his band were playing a club engagement he would insist that Mother and I attend as his guests.

One night when Joe was visiting, Father came in and said, "Mae, would you excuse Joe if I took him over to a place where they need a piano player? Their regular man had an accident."

"All right, I don't mind."

Joe didn't seem too anxious to go; his mind wasn't on a piano, it was on me. But he went with my father.

It seems a woman had come into the place and cut the regular piano player's throat. He had been taken to the hospital, where he died. And she said she was sorry. "He wasn't a bad guy—just sometimes he got on my nerves."

Father took Joe to the tavern, where in the back room with a "family entrance" they had entertainment. He introduced Joe to a singer named Gus Van. They worked well together after that, and as a team. Later they became the celebrated Van & Schenck, vaudeville headliners, widely popular in the late 'teens and 1920's.

My next boy friend in long trousers was Otto North, who lived across the street. He was a young prize-fighter, dark and fairly tall, and fought in the light-heavyweight division. His parents and my father and mother were acquainted in a neighborly way.

Father, having been a fighter, was interested in the boy. A couple of Saturday nights when Joe Schenck and his band were at our house, Otto was invited and joined in the fun, and I decided to make him my own. When Joe was away playing engage-

ments on the road, Otto asked my Father if he could take me out to Trommer's at Coney Island. I liked Otto, and we started going out together as a steady thing.

Everybody seemed a little stage crazy at the time, and we went to a meeting of a dramatic society. At the entrance to the place five or six well-dressed young men were standing around. As I passed through they all took a look at me, bugged their eyes and grinned. I walked down the hall that led to the meeting and I had the creepy feeling of eyes on me, and I glanced back. They were leaning forward in the doorway gazing after me with expressions of Siberian wolves following a plump peasant.

If Otto was aware of the warmth of the greeting he didn't show it. The meeting hall had a stage at one end and the place was also often used for dances, so the seats were removable. The show the club was putting on, I heard, wouldn't start for some time. I decided to go to the powder room and inspect my hair in a mirror.

The powder room was down the long narrow hall we had come through from the street. One of the fellows who had been outside saw me, came inside and walked up the hall toward me, the way a bad guy does. For a moment we were alone, and the lout stood in front of me, blocking my way.

He smiled. "I'm glad to see you alone for a minute, Duchess. How about me taking you out? Maybe for some clams and corn on the cob?" He put his arms around me.

I said, "You'll be sorry. Someone will see you."

I tried to move away from him. He embraced me with one strong arm.

"Who cares, honey?"

"You'll find out."

I could hear someone coming and I pushed the lout away. He ran outside into the street. Otto came up, sparks in his eyes. "Stay here, Mae," Otto said, and rushed past me at express train speed out into the street. I followed. He was ready to start a fight. But

the other boys stepped between them and held onto Otto. "Listen, fella—it was just kidding."

"If I wasn't a professional fighter, I'd murder the guy."

Someone said, "It can be arranged. The mixup can be settled by a gang fight."

Otto belonged to the notorious Eagles' Nest. The other gang was called the Red Hooks.

After the show, I said, "Otto, you going to fight them?"

"Honey, you should be flattered. It's all over you."

"Not if you get broken up."

"I'll try and hold together."

The next evening I saw a bloody street battle that turned into one of the worst gang fights on record. The gangs were not kids, but young men. Rocks and clubs were used, and ambulances had to be summoned to remove the casualties. I watched it from a porch, politely—not cheering.

While the fight was still going on, Father led me safely to the perimeter of the battle zone, and told me, "Wait here, Mae. I'm going to see how it's progressing." Before I knew it, he was in the thick of it.

Later Mama patched up his face and said, "Now, Mae, I don't mind your fella fighting, but don't involve your father in these things."

Poor Otto couldn't kiss good for a week. As Papa said, he forgot to duck.

I decided to go back to vaudeville before I had all the young men in the neighborhood playing at gang warfare. I saw the pattern of my relationship with the male sex that was to recur throughout my life, where the one becomes the many, and without so much as my having to lift even my voice. This is not ego, saying this; just a fact.

3



Oh, That Voice of Experience



EVERYBODY was fighting to control vaudeville and the top acts. Doctor Cook, who claimed to have discovered the North Pole, toured in a chilly act at a thousand dollars a week. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was already dancing. And the Three Keatons featured their small son, Buster, who had to hide in a trunk when the Gerry Society came around; *their* job was to keep every child performer under sixteen off the stage in New York. I was to have my trouble with them, but I never hid in a trunk. Fred and Adele Astaire, "the dancing kids," played out of towns for years because of the Gerry Society ban. Charlie Chaplin was old enough to get by and he played a society drunk in an imported act called *A Night in a London Music Hall*. He had not yet invented his little tramp.

Between boy friends and my desire to act I was kept busy. I kept up with the popular songs. Double entendre songs were the rage in the more sophisticated circles. Vesta Victoria and Alice Lloyd had a way of singing them: "Stockings on the Line" and "Who You Looking At?" Even the theatres had plays that shocked the early 20th century. *The Easiest Way* was a drama about a kept

woman, and *The Girl from Rectors* seemed to run forever as a bedroom farce with lace underwear and doors that opened both ways. I was undecided between becoming a singer and dancer or a dramatic actress.

I was pretty sure of myself and took little advice, but I decided I'd keep the patrons behind the footlights when I played vaudeville. Vaudeville was getting fancy names, as each manager tried to convince the public his was the best. "Advanced Vaudeville" fought off "Fashionable Vaudeville" and "Polite Vaudeville." But as Nora Bayes said to her partner, Jack Norworth, in their popular singing act, "No matter what they call it there is never enough hot water in the dressing rooms."

I watched the big women stars and enjoyed Sarah Bernhardt on a bill. She had a clause in her contract forbidding animal acts to play with her, but she permitted W. C. Fields, who was then an international juggler just discovering he had a gravel-bourbon voice and point of view. Fanny Brice was in burlesque, and the Marx Brothers were touring the sticks in an act called *Fun in School*. Groucho painted his mustache on in those days. The New York Star Burlesque featured a cowboy called Will Rogers, and everyone said: "How far can you get with a roping act?"

I went back to playing Huck Finn's girl on a vaudeville date. Frank Wallace, a song and dance man, was on the same bill. Frank had a lively young personality, and belted his songs out in a style that would later be called "jazz." And he was a remarkable dancer. Audiences liked him very much as he was a very good looking boy. I did too.

We met and talked backstage—decided to team up—and it wasn't long before he met Mother. With some persuasion, she finally agreed. "All right, you two can work together."

We worked out a very flashy act. Loud opening, chic costumes, patter, comic love song, good get-off—in other words, the usual

song-and-dance routine. One song I remember was called "I Love It." We sang it and finally danced to it. It was very effective—sultry, passionate and so smooth. It was a big hit. We had offers and we played a series of bookings, some of them on the road in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Frank asked me to marry him, which didn't surprise me; he sang "I Love It" with feeling. But marriage was the furthest thing in my plans. I was seventeen and liked my freedom.

I was getting a lot of attention from men, either those on the bill or those stopping at the hotels or boarding houses where we stayed. There is a roving world of unattached males in America—an army of eager beavers, white hunters and Kinsey Report bait. Wallace became quite upset, and he kept pleading with me to marry him.

"I love you."

"That sounds fine."

"Keep away from those men."

"They come to me."

An older prima donna type woman on the show bill took it on herself to talk to me after a matinee one day. "Look, dearie, why don't you marry Wallace, and play it safe?"

"Play it safe?" I said. "Why? I don't want to marry anybody. I'm not in love."

"Listen, Mae, with all these men tomcatting around, sooner or later something's going to happen to you. Marry Wallace and be respectable."

The way she dissected romantic love was a little distasteful to me, but it did start me thinking that I had a problem. A problem called Mae West.

Wallace continued his pleading, and the prima donna continued her advice.

In Milwaukee, on April 11, 1911, Frank Wallace and I appeared before a judge and the knot was tied. It later proved to be some knot. The judge must have learned it from a sailor.

On the license I had given my age as eighteen—the required age in Wisconsin without parents' consent—although I was still seventeen and wouldn't celebrate my eighteenth birthday until the following August. Wallace was twenty-one.

I made Wallace solemnly promise something. I said, "A condition to my marrying you is that you never reveal our marriage to anyone. Mother and Father must never know."

He did keep his word for a long, long time. And we had separate rooms. So I was married and honeymooned in a noisy hotel room.

I was sorry for Wallace that I wasn't in love with him. "It's just this physical thing," I told him. "You don't move my finer instincts."

"What are they, Mae?"

"I don't know yet. But I must have them."

"You've got everything, Mae."

"We're talking about different things."

Wallace was a nice fellow, but my temperament was such that—I admit it honestly—I did not want the marriage to last. When we finished our road booking and got back to New York, Wallace wanted to set up a domestic establishment for us. I told him, "It can't be that way, honey. You have practically taken an oath that you wouldn't reveal our marriage. If we were to live together, Mother and Father are sure to find out. They'll ask why, at seventeen, I'm not living at home with them."

"But I love you, Mae."

"That's good."

To make it a little easier on Wallace, I told him Mother wanted me to do a single act for a while. That dissolved our professional partnership and in time my only marriage.

I began working as a single—and since all agents and bookers were men I was soon involved again. I began going out with a good-looking manager of a theatre on Broadway near 46th Street. It was on the roof of this theatre that Ziegfeld was play-

ing his current *Follies*. One evening at the theatre, an agent came and asked my friend, "Can I have the theatre for rehearsals in the morning?"

"For what?"

"We're putting on a big act going out on the United Booking Offices Circuit for forty weeks. Twelve girls, two comedians, an ingenue. You know—a full cast."

I asked the agent, "Do you have a juvenile lead?"

"We're still looking for a good looking young man who can sing and dance and act, Miss West."

I said, "Frank Wallace, my former partner, would be just the type you want."

"I'd like to see him."

The next day, Wallace got the job. He told me, "I don't like the idea of going away for forty weeks without you."

I thought, "Get used to it, Wallace—you're going."

He went out of my life, except for a legal echo, years later, when I was a Hollywood motion picture star. I had made a mistake in marriage. I promised not to make it again.

This one weird experience with matrimony made me respect the institution. I knew that I had broken a promise, a bargain, a contract. If I were to get into the habit of doing that, my word would not be worth the breath that spoke it in any other agreement, and I would soon be renegeing on business and professional understandings. I have never knowingly allowed a married man to form an attachment with me. One look at a wedding ring and I give him a very stiff-armed "How do you do?"

By 1911 I had sung and danced on vaudeville tours. Now I wanted to try out in New York City myself. I appeared at a Sunday night concert on Broadway, at the Columbia Theatre, singing and dancing my best numbers on a program with many new acts. At these Sunday night shows, the United Booking Office would

be represented to catch new acts, and there would also be Broadway producers looking for new talent. It was the first time New York saw me as a single, and I tried to sing and dance the place down.

The great Florenz Ziegfeld, looking anything but glamorous, was there that night; and so was the well-known revue producer and director, Ned Wayburn, a large, wise looking man. Both sent me word they would like to see me.

I went to see Ziegfeld. He had a fine show on the New York Roof and he said he wanted me in it. But I didn't like this type of theatre. "It's too big, too wide, there isn't much chance for a personality—I need people close to me."

"Tell me—what's wrong with my roof for you?"

"I'm thinking of myself and how I would appear up on your stage. I wouldn't be working alone on stage, I wouldn't be seen to my best advantage by the entire audience at the same time. People on one side of the orchestra floor wouldn't be able to see what was happening on the other side of the stage. The entire effect of my personality depends on audiences being able to see my facial expressions, gestures, slow, lazy comic mannerisms, to hear me properly."

"You intrigue me, Miss West."

"If you ever put the *Follies* into another theatre, I'd be glad to work for you."

I wasn't bluffing. I was bold and brazen—but I knew I'd be a fool to play a stage not right for me. And I had impressed Ziegfeld.

"Come up to my theatre, Miss West, during the day, when no one is there and try the stage; perhaps you'll get used to the place."

I said I would, but I didn't mean it.

I went to see Ned Wayburn. Wayburn congratulated me on my act.

"I may want you for a new show."

"What theatre would the show go into?"

"The Fulton Theatre on West 46th Street. Why?"

"Could I see the theatre?"

"Sure, if you wish."

"I'll be right back and let you know."

He looked a little mystified. "This is a new one on me, Miss West, previewing a theatre."

"Wait till you get to know me better."

At the Fulton Theatre a porter was cleaning up and the doors were open. I went in and looked the place over. It had gilt balconies and deep red boxes that hugged the stage. It was intimate and the type of theatre I was used to working in when I was a child actress with the stock company.

I went back to Ned Wayburn's office and told him, "The theatre is fine and I'll be in your show."

"Well, I better take you before you inspect the city."

Being in a big Broadway show would pay a good salary, yet I was more interested in what my part would be like—what material—what kind of songs I would do.

Wayburn gave me a part to read. I looked through it, and said, "It's a good part. But I'd like to change a few things in it."

"We'll talk about it at rehearsal."

I looked over the two songs Wayburn had for me. They were both good. One of them, "They Are Irish," I liked especially. This song I was to do with the two top comedians, Cook and Lorenz, a vaudeville team that also appeared in musical revues, in a scene in which they appeared as comedy plumbers. The song had only a verse and one chorus. There was a lot to be rehearsed in this show, and the comics were having difficulty with their props, their "plumbers' friend"—a rubber tool that didn't sound loud enough. They never got to rehearse the song with me, but spent their time with prop bathroom fixtures.

In the second week of rehearsals I went to Ned Wayburn. "Don't we ever rehearse?"

"Yes, we will have to get to that."

But we didn't. The complications with the water pipes kept on. I rehearsed the song by myself. It needed extra choruses. I knew if I waited until the writers got around to it, there wouldn't be time to learn them. We were getting closer to the opening and a comic was injured by a prop bathroom fixture.

I took it upon myself to write two choruses for "They Are Irish," and got a songwriter to write three more. I didn't tell the producer, poor man; he had so much to do. I didn't rehearse at the theatre. I went to a music publisher's office and rehearsed there.

The plumber-comics Cook and Lorenz never did get to rehearse the song with me. The nearest thing was a brief run-through of one verse and chorus. "Dear, it's great—wait till you see our blowtorch bit," they said. "We've decided just to use the song as an entrance number for you."

It was a good time to play dumb and I did. There were going to be more surprises than a blowtorch.

The Ned Wayburn Revue, called, *A la Broadway and Hello, Paris*, was beautifully mounted and gorgeously costumed. It opened September 22, 1911. I was an unknown. And this worried Mr. Jesse Lasky, a trumpet player from vaudeville, then one of the big producers. Later he became head of Paramount Studios, but just then I was his only big problem. During rehearsals I didn't show up too well. He wondered whether I was able to carry the part. But Ned Wayburn had confidence in me and I had plenty of confidence in myself. I could hardly wait until opening night to get out there and get at that audience before Mr. Lasky got at me and said, "You're out."

Opening night was wild and confusing. My first scene was in a spectacular military setting with an ensemble of twelve boys and twelve girls in magnificent uniforms behind me doing a military

drill number. At the end of the number they would stand at attention for my entrance. I was to do the song, now without the comedians, Cook and Lorenz.

At the dress rehearsal, Ned Wayburn had said, "If you should happen to get an encore opening night, what will you do?"

"I have an extra chorus ready for 'They Are Irish.' Just tell the conductor to play the chorus again in the same tempo."

"When did we get an extra chorus?"

"You've been very busy, Mr. W."

So as soon as the military nonsense stopped I poured on-stage and went to work. I never stopped. I took seven encores! After that number, every time I came on stage I got a wild, tremendous reception. Mr. Wayburn smiled, and Mr. Lasky polished his glasses in a daze and decided he liked me after all.

No one had much faith in the song until opening night, but I knew that a good dialect song with English, Dutch, Italian, Jewish, or Irish overtones never failed in those days of early immigration. The song gave me an opportunity to do each extra chorus in a different dialect. I used all the stage tricks I had learned in stock training and vaudeville experience. I got the top notices of the show. Critics love to discover somebody the audience didn't know before.

The producers were delighted. Ned Wayburn congratulated me, smiled at me, and shook his head. "I don't remember any of those choruses."

My other song—ragtime—was a production number, "The Philadelphia Drag," and I did eccentric and acrobatic dancing. It was also a show-stopper.

The author of the show was William Le Baron, a Broadway writer. He had written a scene in which I played a maid planted in the home of a wealthy family by a writer so that she could take notes on how the family lived and acted, what their manners and habits were. It was to have been a young Irish maid.

But not me—I played it as a flip, fresh, lazy character who acted

as a maid shouldn't. I got a lot of laughs, and this also turned out to be good for the show. After the opening night, Bill Le Baron came backstage and put his arms around me.

"You certainly surprised everyone tonight. Got your own music and rewrote my Irish maid. Anything else you want to change?"

"I'm too tired to climb onto the roof and put up my name in lights."

The next time I met Bill Le Baron was in 1932 in Hollywood. William Le Baron was to be the producer of some of my best pictures.

Opening night prolonged itself with after-theatre stage parties. Ziegfeld had been down front and at the final curtain had thrown a rose up to me. The Shuberts, Lee and J. J., master showmen and theatre tycoons, were also there opening night. I had a feeling I'd hear from them too. I had made a big impression on Broadway. I hoped it showed.

Mother and Father took me home. We couldn't stop talking all the way. I had expected success, but not so much of it rolled up in one wild opening.

The next day the stage manager changed my dressing room. I had shared one on the second floor with two other girls. Now I had a part of a star's dressing room. I shared it with Minerva Coverdale, an amusing Broadway musical star.

As soon as I got to the theatre the chorus girls and boys, shrill and flip, crowded around me and read me the reviews. "You received the best notices, above everyone else in the show, Mae."

"Well let's not get carried away."

But they *were* good notices.

New York *Herald*: "... there were some shining lights in the cast, notably Miss Mae West, who played the part of a wise, flip maid. She danced in Turkish harem trousers in a most energetic, amusing and carefree manner."

Evening World: "It was on Miss Mae West's appearance that the first real hit was made. She seems to be a sort of female George M. Cohan, with an amusingly impudent manner and an individual way of making her points. In 'The Philadelphia Drag' her costume of Quaker gray was comically emphasized by a pair of Turkish trousers of flaming un-Quaker-like color, and brandished about with un-Quaker-like joy."

The New York Times: "Again there was some color and pretty movement in a Continental march by the chorus, and a girl named Mae West, hitherto unknown, pleased by her grotesquerie and a snappy way of singing and dancing."

New York Sun: "Miss Mae West had a song or two that went pretty well, and she danced with considerable grace and originality."

New York Tribune: "Mae West, as Maggie O'Hara, really put a little newness into her ragtime songs. She has a bit of a sense of nonsense, which is the very latest addition to wit."

One review, now yellowed and scarcely legible, seemed to sum it all up:

Miss West is a clever little comedienne, who scored one of the big hits of the night. Her song "They Are Irish" should be a winner in the metropolis, dealing with the various nationalities to be found in the big town. In "The Philadelphia Drag," aided by the chorus, she is featured in one of the best specialties of the evening.

At eighteen I was a hit in a big Broadway show—I had half a star's dressing room—and I wasn't satisfied. There was a lot more I wanted, a lot more I wanted to try. And the gentlemen lined up at the stage door and the dressing room with big bouquets made a jungle of hothouse flowers from hothouse males.



Snow White Starts Drifting



I HAD BEEN RIGHT about the Shuberts. Their wise eyes had approved of me, and it was only a matter of coming to terms as to salary, material and music.

In November, 1911, I went into a Shubert show, *Vera Violetta*, at the Winter Garden Theatre. It ran 112 performances with such stars as Al Jolson, Gaby Deslys, Stella Mayhew, and that prime comedian, Barney Bernard. I had solid, outstanding material and specialties that gained me a great deal of attention both from audiences and the reviewers.

It was a season that saw the first American appearance of the Irish Players, with Arthur Sinclair, Sara Allgood, Cathleen Nesbit, Una O'Connor and J. M. Kerrigan, in plays by Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, George Bernard Shaw and St. John Ervine.

There was a new comedy, *The Littlest Rebel*, with Dustin Farnum, William Farnum and Mary Miles Minter; and Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske held audiences in *Mrs. Bumstead-Leigh*.

Since the end of the run of the Ned Wayburn show, two dancers from that show, Bobby O'Neill and Harry Laughlin, had been talking about me getting together an act with them and going

out in vaudeville. I liked the boys. They were my type—men. They were very enthusiastic about me, off- and on-stage. When I closed with *Vera Violetta* we fixed up an act, and I gave the boys the name of The Gerard Brothers, for no good reason I can remember. It had class, I told them.

We secured bookings in Philadelphia, Boston, Bridgeport, New Haven and other cities. We were billed as "Mae West and the Gerard Brothers."

"Mae—who's our agent?"

"Frank Bohm is our agent, one of the top artists' representatives."

"That he is, Mae."

When we had first got the act together, I went to a booking agent the boys had been talking to. I explained the act to him, and he liked it. So much in fact that he said, "But, Miss West, the way you tell it, it has too much class for the type of bookings I'm handling."

"Really?"

"You should have a big agent for this."

"Suggest somebody."

"I'll call up Frank Bohm. He is the man that should handle you."

The three of us went to see Frank Bohm and I was not impressed. He sat slouched like a broken greyhound at his desk and wore a slouch hat pushed to the back of his head. He was tall, with black hair and eyes, and rather attractive looking, spoiled by a surly manner and a kind of cynical bend to his mouth. His attitude was a drama of a man who practiced complete indifference to everything.

I talked to him about our act. His keeping his hat on annoyed me. It was the first time a man hadn't removed his hat in my presence since I was ten—at least indoors. It irritated me so much that I lost interest in what we were there for.

He picked up a pencil, looked at his booking list and penciled us into a spot. He didn't look at me. He had a habit, I learned, of not looking at people when he talked to them. "You open in South Norwalk tomorrow night."

I just looked at him.

"For one night. And you don't get paid for it. I'll be up there and I'll have some theatre managers up there to look at the act. You get ten dollars for traveling expenses."

"You can keep the ten dollars," I said, and almost added anatomical banking details. "We don't need it."

He again looked directly at me, and a flicker of interest stirred in his ironic features.

"South Norwalk," said a Gerard Brother, "tomorrow night. We'll be there."

I passed behind Bohm's chair as we went out and brushed against him, knocking his hat over his eyes. I said nothing.

Outside, the boys shivered in mock horror and looked worried. "Gee, Mae, maybe we should have taken the ten dollars."

I laughed. "Don't worry, boys. That ten will get us more from Mr. Bohm."

The tryout of our act in South Norwalk, Connecticut, was a success. The act went over very big with the natives and college boys. They gave us an appreciative and noisy reception. I got whistles.

Out front were Frank Bohm and Chris Brown, a head booker for a vaudeville circuit, to catch the act. We all left together on the same train for New York late that night. I was now getting a lot of personal attention from both of the gentlemen agents.

Bohm said, "Mae, you've got something."

Brown added, "You can say that again."

We were booked immediately for a Sunday in New York at the Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street, for the grand sum of \$100. That was a large salary for a day's work at that time. We

played the matinee and went over with cheers. Bohm was out front and again caught the act. One of the innocent Gerards said, "He likes *us*."

There was a message backstage. "Mr. Bohm will send his man with his car for Miss West after the matinee for a meeting uptown in his office."

I said, "What! Is he in his office on Sunday?"

I was a little annoyed about going all the way uptown to Forty-sixth Street and Broadway. I was expecting Mother and the Gerard Brothers to join me, and we were all going to dinner. Both of the Gerards, handsome young men, were fond of me, and I couldn't make up my mind which of them I liked best. I was in no hurry for a choice.

But reluctantly I was driven uptown to Bohm's office. When I arrived, he was already there sitting at his desk, with his hat on. I later learned this hat trick was common among agents, who kept memos and lists of acts handily tucked in the inside bands of their hats. Possibly this practice originated the saying about a man that "he had his office in his hat." Bohm didn't get up to greet me as I came in, and this annoyed me.

"Don't you even change hats on Sunday?"

He looked up at me. "I want to talk to you. I want to take you to dinner."

"Dinner is out, Mr. B., and I'm in a hurry. I've got to go back to the theatre to meet Mother and have dinner with her."

"All right, we can drive back and get your Mother, and all have dinner at Rector's or the Astor."

A fool could see Mr. Bohm was in trouble over me—and I was no fool. A few more dinners and I found out that he cared for me beyond the call of an agent's duty. I also found out that he wasn't a person who made a habit of this sort of thing. His habitual attitude toward the women who came to his office was the indifferent, surly, almost rude manner he had displayed the first time I had gone to his office. But it was all a shell, a coat of mail;

underneath he was a kind and even intelligent man. I liked him and soon there was an intimate, warm understanding between us.

Bohm gave me a diamond ring on my promise that I would not see Joseph M. Schenk. When I had gone to dinner with Schenk, he too wanted to "know me better," a phrase I was beginning to suspect of being an understatement.

He was a charmer, generous, vital and adoring. Here again was my usual pattern of two men, and I couldn't make up my mind between them. This situation extended itself and I kept my sanity by having the Gerard Brothers to soothe me on tour.

We played a number of large cities. In New Haven it was suggested that I had a suggestive act. Complaints were made by the local blue-noses and I was, according to the newspapers, in trouble.

HER WRIGGLES COST

MAE WEST HER JOB

Curves In Motion Shock Lou Garvey at Palace.

Whole Act "Fired."

Lou Garvey, manager of the Palace Theatre vaudeville house for Mr. Poli's chain, where only vaudeville of the better type was shown, had been told by Mr. Poli to *watch* the acts.

What was it I did that caused all the trouble? I wriggled! I wriggled in what the paper called ". . . that enchanting, seductive, sin-promising wriggle. She shook in a devastating slow motion that has conquered New York. She sang in a wonderful champagne-laden voice."

Worse, I addressed the vaudeville audience, made up mostly of young bloods, students from Yale and young men-about-town, in the original Mae West tone. The house went wild. A shout went up from the balcony, and the handclapping was strong enough to worry the manager of the theatre.

The paper went on: "Maybe the blonde dancer was used to be-

ing criticized. She looked innocent enough when she was called into the office. 'That is my act,' she said, 'and that is the way I do it.' There was no harm in it as far as she could see. The manager thought differently, however. Firmly, but politely, he explained to the dancer that the act would have to 'be modified.' As far as he was concerned the act was already changed.

"That evening, just for safety's sake, Mr. Garvey was again in the wings. Mr. Poli was firm in his policy that no vaudeville number should be of such a character that there might be any criticism, even from the most morally sensitive. On thinking it over, Mr. Garvey began to feel a little concerned. There was an air of expectation in the theatre that evening. It seemed that already the word had gotten out, and the afternoon audience had returned threefold.

"Mae West came on. There was an expectant burst of hand-clapping and cries from the gallery. She flashed her dazzling smile, and slid into a wriggle, the same seductive, wicked wriggle that Lou Garvey had censored that afternoon. The audience went wild. Mr. Garvey grew purple, and Mr. Poli himself was summoned.

"This time there was trouble in the office. The 'act' was called in. The two 'heelers' looked worried, but not Mae. When the management spluttered, she looked unconcerned. She 'couldn't help it,' she said. She listened to the angry men with a smile and a bold air. She laughed, and if reported rightly, she put her hand on her hip and wriggled out! . . ."

After the sensation caused by my first performance, fifty Yale men who had occupied almost all of the orchestra seats in the first five rows of the center section, returned in a body for the second show. Having seen all the other acts at the matinee, they waited until just before I came on to march down the aisle and take their seats, singing "Boola Boola."

The empty reserved seats down front had an unnerving effect on the acts that preceded me; and then the sudden mass move-

ment of men coming down the aisle while the show was going on and getting to their seats in time for my entrance, was rather upsetting to the audience already seated.

The same thing happened at the third performance the next afternoon, and was intended by the Yale boys to go on for the week, but our act had already been fired—so the Yale boys wrecked the theatre. A charming gesture.

Audiences have always been pleased by what I do, and I have always been doing the same basic thing, with different trimmings. I didn't recognize what I did myself at that time. I didn't know what it was I had. It wasn't until much later that anyone, including myself, realized that it was the force of an extraordinary sex-personality that made quite harmless lines and mannerisms seem suggestive. It wasn't what I did, but how I did it. It wasn't what I said, but how I said it; and how I looked when I did it and said it. I had evolved into a symbol and didn't know it.

We went on with the act, playing the rest of the weeks we had booked. Frank Bohm became convinced that the Gerard Brothers' attentions to me were not strictly platonic. I claimed otherwise. Frank thought it was time to break up the act. He said simply, "I can get as much or more money for you alone as for the three of you."

"I'm not objecting, honey."

I was getting \$350 a week for the act. The boys got \$50 apiece and were happy. They had been getting only \$18 a week as chorus boys. I paid the agent's commission and traveling expenses.

Bohm's suggestion sounded attractive, and as I wanted to spend a lot of money on my stage costumes, it seemed a good idea to appear alone on stage and give the costumes a chance. My problem was to break the news to the Gerard Brothers—I didn't want them to take Frank up an alley and stomp him to death with a tap dance routine. They took it nicely, if sadly, and the one I

liked best said, "You're a great girl and a great act. It isn't what you do—it's how you do it."

I may use that as an epitaph.

Now that I had found what I had, I decided to dress it as it had never been dressed before. Madame Frances, Milgrim's, and Bendel's were quite the most exclusive *modistes* in New York City. So I went to them to bedeck my body.

I thought little of spending two hundred dollars for a simple satin gown with very little trimming. It was the style and the material that mattered. I had a gown of solid rhinestones and heavier than a Puritan's guilt feeling after sin; a long gown slit way up the thigh. It weighed forty pounds, had perfectly plain but alluring lines and clung to my body like skin. It cost \$540, and under a spotlight it looked like a million dollars in well applied diamonds. Today it would cost \$5,000 to duplicate it. I also had silver cloth slippers from I. Miller with large rhinestone buckles to go with the gown.

And as a grand climax, a brocade coat with a train long as a Rolls-Royce. It was draped with white fox, the whole animal, crawling up the train of the coat. Later I had a deep Imperial purple velvet gown with three baum marten furs dyed cerise, walking up one side of the gown along the thigh to my hips. I wasn't hard to please if the price was high enough.

With such expensive tastes I was naturally happy when Frank Bohm assured me, "I can get you \$350 a week while you are breaking in the single, and \$750 a week when you go out as a headliner."

"That seems fair."

"And stop buying up Hudson's Bay Company. They can trap furs faster than you can buy them."

I had another expensive professional habit. I changed my act and material often. I no sooner had an act perfected than I be-

came bored with it. I was Mae West's toughest audience. I needed new excitement, fresh inspiration.

Most vaudeville actors, once they perfect their act, play it for years and years without change. To change an act was like asking for bad luck. Some acts were loved because they never changed. Today there are acts who still use material they perfected thirty or forty years ago. And they look it.

But I was a young lady in a hurry to get somewhere, and to have played the same act, no matter how good, year in and year out, would have seemed to me a terrible bore. I was too restless, too nervous, to stand still, or even to keep running in the same spot. I wasn't the treadmill type. And while I didn't know it then, I was developing into a genuine artist who could create material and ideas. Change was to be the key to my professional life, and the pattern and inspiration of my love life. I can't honestly separate the two. I kept one a profession and one a passion, but both were vital parts of the same me.

I played one of the vaudeville theatres uptown in New York City, breaking in my new act for the United Booking Office Circuit. After the regular professional performance, when an amateur show was put on, I decided to bring another member of the family into show business.

My sister Beverly was twelve years old. She had a lovely voice, and was a beautiful girl. I thought this was the time for her to make a first appearance on the stage. Mother and Dad agreed, and one evening they were present for Beverly's debut.

Beverly sang a song called "Play That Cello Melody," which was such a popular hit tune that it had been done four times on the same show by other actors before her. It had been played by a musician and sung by a team on the regular bill, and two droopy amateurs had mauled it. She sang the song so beautifully that she came away with the first prize, to the surprise of the losers.

Frank Bohm was there and other agents, and Beverly was booked professionally that summer, during her school vacation,

in all the Loew's theatres in New York and Brooklyn. She was featured and received a salary of \$75 a week. Beverly continued to play in vaudeville during summer vacations while in high school. When she finished school at sixteen, she appeared in vaudeville regularly and did very well. But we never did much of a sister act. I always liked to go it alone.

During 1915, with the war in Europe roaring on the fringes of our world, far away and still remote, I was continually working on my vaudeville act, changing this, trying that, always striving to get a new or better effect. I wrote my first song. I had always rewritten or changed lines in the lyrics of songs I used in my acts to suit my style of delivery and my personal mannerisms. But this was the first song number I had ever dreamed up and written. I had a very good melody for it. Here are the words for "The Cave Girl."

I got my smile from the sunshine;
I got my tears from the rain;
I learned to dance
When I saw the tiger prance.
And the peacock taught me to be vain.

A wise old owl in a tree so high
He taught me how to wink my eye.
I learned to bill and coo from a turtle dove
And a grizzly bear taught me how to hug.
But the guy that lived two caves from me
Taught me how to love.

And that great, great Something from above
Made us fall in love.

I used it effectively in my act and the audiences liked it, especially as I did it wearing a leopard skin and sang the spots off it. It may not have been prehistoric but it was certainly history making.

Jack Kolasky, an up and coming young artist, better known

around Broadway and show business as Jay Kay, had made many sketches and paintings of me. Then at this time when I was eighteen and in vaudeville, I got the idea of using some of his paintings of me as lobby displays in the theatres where I appeared. Usually the lobby displays were of actors' photos, and this was the first time paintings were used. They created a lot of attention and excitement, so much so that when Frank Bohm saw them he immediately wanted to meet whoever had done them. Theatre managers where I played were also enthusiastic, for they often had trouble getting actors' photos in time for their advance billing. It got so that a theatre would even cancel an act if the management failed to receive some advance photos.

The lobby display idea went over so big that Frank Bohm and some associates set up a studio for Jack Kolasky, and he became the first to make all the lobby displays for the United Booking Office Theatres, Loew's Circuit, and Fox. Jack then established his business name as Jay Kay. Within a year he was getting several thousand dollars a week for his work.

Jack had a wonderful personality, and a sweet, loyal nature. Everyone loved him. He remained one of my very dearest and devoted friends, one on whom I could always depend absolutely until he died a few years ago. I'll always miss Jack.

Playing vaudeville from 1912 to 1916 was an education. I played every big city. Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore—name them. I learned the subtle difference in audiences in different cities, not only from their loud reaction to my own act, but from the varied reactions of the audience to the other acts on the bill. I could attune myself to the faintest shuffle or cough.

I discovered that a good musical act would always go well in any large city, although the act would sometimes have to change one of its musical numbers in certain cities because some cities liked ragtime songs, some popular ballads. If the act was closing its routine with a big hit song of the day, one that the audience was

familiar with, and it was the Number One hit song, the act would finish with great applause. But if that same act with that same song were playing another city, and it did not go over too well, it was only because that particular audience had not yet become familiar with the hit song. It hadn't been "plugged" enough in that city. (There were no radio or disc jockeys then to make a whole country conscious of a song almost immediately.)

The stage manager would generally know which song was popular with the audience in his theatre, so an act could ask him what to close with for a smash finish.

Songs were changing. "Without A Wedding Ring" no longer made them weep, and Irving Berlin stopped writing dialect songs like "Becky Do The Bombashay." Nine million dollars a year were being used for new theatres, and the dollar then was worth four of ours today and had gold fillings to back it up. Cover charges were already invented and *dansants* and gigolos were active in the tango spots. I always felt personally that paying a man to dance or keep one company was like hiring somebody to take your bath for you.

It was a wild dancing time as Europe smouldered with war and men died in the mud of Flanders across the sea—to the tunes of "My Buddy" and "A Rose in No Man's Land." It was to be the last of the romantic wars. New York saw the French in crayon blue, the British in khaki and swagger sticks, and soon the first of the F. Scott Fitzgerald heroes in Sam Browne belts, escorting the first of the flappers to tea at the Ritz, or worse.

They danced the Castle Walk, the Maxixe, Hesitation Waltz, Turkey Trot, and some of the newer Negro steps creeping up like jungle shapes from New Orleans' Storyville, out of the south to the Loop in Chicago. Dances called "Walking the Dog," and the "Brown Boy Drag." Joe Frisco was already billed as the "Creator of the Jazz Dance."

The big national dance stars were Irene and Vernon Castle, a man and wife team, of Castle Walk fame. They took in \$31,000

a week in one-night stands. Vernon was killed in training, and show business began to feel the war was real and dangerous.

I was aware of the changing times and I studied audiences and acts to discover all the secrets of show business. The comedy acts, I noticed, had the greatest difficulty. I would hear them complaining as they came off stage, "What a lousy audience to-night. Last night they were all right, they laughed at any joke. Tonight they didn't cop any of the gags. I can't understand them apple-knockers. What's the matter with them? Always sitting on their hands."

In my own act, some nights I would go out and as soon as I made a gesture or sang my first line of a lyric, I would get a big, boisterous reaction from the audience. I'd be a hit from then on and finish with encore after encore. Another night I would go on and wouldn't get much of a reaction until my second song, or even my third song.

I used to have to work on the audience, appeal to them with little private gestures, twists of my head, the way I spoke a word, or winked over a song line. It didn't appear that I was working hard to "get" the audience. I had an easy, nonchalant manner, an air of indifference. That was my style and I couldn't change it. But inside I would be worried about the audience. One thing I never did was to lose patience with an audience. I would continue to do my best, gradually, and usually in the end I would get them, have them captive as I took the last of my bows.

My work in Broadway shows had not prepared me for the variety of audiences I faced in vaudeville houses around the country. Broadway audiences were more sophisticated in their tastes, and having paid the top prevailing prices of \$2.20 for seats, looked for the best of smart entertainment, something they couldn't get anywhere else. They were not upset if what they heard and saw was a bit risqué as to costume or blue line. Broad-

way audiences expected it in their shows, especially musicals.

This was not so in vaudeville theatres in cities away from New York, in what was once called the "sticks." Each city and every town set its own standard for entertainment. Your acceptance by audiences in any of these places depended on how well you adapted your wit and performances to their own country cousin standards.

Today motion pictures, radio, and television have brought Broadway sophistication and big city ideas to even the remotest of green corn communities. Today there is no longer such a thing as a "hick" audience. Almost anything goes, anywhere, if it is good and fast and amusing. Risque material is only offensive if badly done without style and charm. I brought my own sophisticated ideas and style to the vaudeville stage but I had to adjust it to the standard of each theatre, and even to each night's audience in the theatre.

I would look out at my audience, standing in my tiger skin, before the show would start, when the house lights were up before the overture was played. I would try to figure out what the audience looked like, what they did, what problems of life they faced. I would ask a lot of questions of the stage manager. "What kind of people do you get on Monday night in your audience, and Tuesday night, and Wednesday night?"

"Why—they all pay to get in. That kind."

The theatre manager, if he was a man with experience, and knew his business, could usually tell me what the people in town were like, and what the difference in the audiences was on other nights.

I usually found that one night a week you would get a top society crowd, and another night you'd get mostly working class people. Other nights there would be family groups—especially on Friday nights when the kids didn't have to go to school the next day. Saturday nights everybody was out for a good time, so audiences were both mixed and terrific.

There was still another type of audience when the house had been sold out to social, charitable or fraternal organizations. These audiences were often rather stiff and reserved. Dressed up, on their best behavior, conscious of themselves and of the other members of their cult—they were careful as to what they applauded or laughed at. This was the hardest kind of audience to play to.

I learned to adjust the mood, tempo and material of my act. I did whatever seemed necessary to get the best response from each type of audience. I gave it to them fast or slow, or low or mean or sultry. I changed a song, I adapted myself to the way they liked it best. My basic style I never changed; never have changed. I couldn't if I wanted to. I am captive to myself. It or I created a Mae West and neither of us could let go of the other, or want to.

I used to open my act with a song called "I've Got a Style All My Own," and another song called "And Then—."

We were sitting on the couch—and then
The lights went out—and then . . .

The audience did the rest—in imagination, of course.

This number was always good for encores. And it was probably the first song of this type sung in polite vaudeville. I made my special speech after my act. "It isn't what you do, it's how you do it."

That closing line usually set the gallery wild.

I wore a long tight-fitted black velvet gown with silver and rhinestone trimming and a large black velvet hat with the crown taken out and my own hair coming through it, topped by a large plume. It was my own idea to take the crown out of the hat. I did not want to spoil my hair style and a crown would have flattened my curls.

I was very original in a lot of things I did. A few years later designers started taking the crowns off the hats worn by the chorus girls. I also wore in my act a long white dress, very tight with a long train, which I could dramatically kick aside with my toe.

I had to learn it all firsthand. I didn't get it out of books.



I Get a Few Men Made



WHEN I played Detroit, I met Mr. D, who was on the bill with me. He was one of the headliners, with a terrific personality and sensual Latin charm. He was a hit wherever he played. He asked me to dinner after the show, and since I was being given a big party by friends in Detroit I had met through my lawyer—owners of a large department store—I asked D. to be my escort.

The party at one of the big hotels was a dazzler. Two actors on the bill with me, warmed by the wine, came over to me and asked if they could escort me to my hotel later, after the party. D. resented their ideas with his Italian passion—full of gestures, hinting of swords, daggers and blood.

“Calm down, honey. I’m able to pick and choose.”

“They come over to our table and talk to you without getting my permission.”

“I’ll give the permission,” I said. “But go away, boys.”

I calmed D. enough to get him back to my hotel. The next day there was a heated argument between the three men. So whatever it was, it was no longer a secret.

The two actors were constantly trying to get me away from the

passionate D., to go out with them. I found out that Frank Bohm had booked them on the show and had told them, "See she doesn't go out with anyone."

It was too late for Frank. D. had fallen in love with me; he wouldn't leave me for a moment. He had proposed several times that week. I told him I would think about it.

He didn't know that I was married to Wallace. No one knew but Wallace.

The next week I was in Cleveland, and D. was playing in New Jersey, which only increased his ardor. On the way to New York on Sunday, my train stopped at Philadelphia and there to meet me was D. "I'm not taking any chances of you arriving in New York alone. Someone else will be waiting at the station to meet you. Also I wanted to see if you had anyone with you on the train." (He was so right; *he* was in the club car drinking bourbon.)

D. brought me a beautiful diamond ring, and gave it to me on the train. "Not a family jewel—this cost me real money. Please wear it."

I did.

D. said, "I have decided I don't want to be away from you any more. One week of separation has been quite enough. My representative is trying to book me on the same bill with you. Weeks that we can't be booked together I have refused to accept other bookings."

I said, "Excuse me," and went to warn the bourbon drinker.

Frank Bohm also found out. He didn't like it.

I couldn't help myself—D. was an amazing lover. But he had marriage on his mind.

The men who had so far loved me were strong and important citizens who had been attracted to me because they had become aware I was not like the other women they knew. They soon discovered I would not conform to the old-fashioned limits they had set on a woman's freedom of action. Or the myth of a woman's need of male wisdom and protection. This baffled them.

Often made them angry, but oddly enough, once they knew they could not change my philosophy or dominate me, none of them left me; my problem was actually how to get rid of *them*.

I have always disliked vulgarity, drunkenness, and all the foul and dismal habits that go with a so-called good time. I am harsh in my relations to tobacco smokers, I don't drink at all, and my language, while often tinged with show business jargon, does not go in for obscenity, or the common backstage or household oaths.

The one departure I have made from the average citizen's way of life has been personal and sexual, and here, if Kinsey is right, I have only done openly what comes naturally; what the average American does secretly, drenching himself in guilt fixations and phobias because of his sense of sinning.

I have never felt myself a sinner, or committed what I would call sin. Even if the men I knew did their best to convince me their ideas of sin were fun.

D. in his desire to marry me finally met Mother. He asked her, "Do you object to my marrying Mae?"

She told him, "I don't think Mae should marry anyone yet. She ought to wait a few more years."

D. said, "For a man who wants to marry, waiting is hard."

I was now featured as a headliner in vaudeville. Bohm said to me, "The booking office has decided to headline you now in opposition to Eva Tanguay. Mae, you're on top now. She's playing for the William Morris Circuit. A new circuit in opposition to the United Booking Office Circuit."

I got together an entirely new act, new gowns and some new songs. For my first weeks of playing in opposition to Tanguay, I was billed: "Mae West—Vaudeville's Youngest Headliner."

Eva Tanguay was strong opposition. She was a remarkable and wild personality who tore down a theatre, and she was an

established star. A headliner for many years, she always looked great, and was great. She was the greatest song-seller vaudeville ever had as she shouted, "I Don't Care!", her theme song. It was an enormous compliment to me that I was chosen to play in opposition to her.

Mother was happy. "I always felt, Mae, that your style is so original that some day you will be the greatest."

"We'll see."

D. was very happy. So much so that after the second week of my route, he cancelled his bookings and came along with me.

It does no harm to the ego to be worshiped, I found out.

D. had a union card in the Musician's Union, and insisted on conducting the orchestra for me. He purchased tails, white gloves, a baton. D. had never led an orchestra before, and was extremely nervous. I tried to comfort him and told him how wonderful he looked. I assured him that "Everything will go over big." With my assurance and kisses bolstering him, he stepped into the orchestra pit the first few times, and got to like it. After my second song I used to ask the audience: "How do you like my leader?" I saw D. always got a big hand.

I played in Norfolk, Virginia, at the Colonial. Will Oakland, a handsome wit, was the headliner, and he bothered D. considerably because of his attention to me. I laughed it off when he asked me about it. "You great big handsome man," I said, "can you think of anyone better than you?"

He agreed to that, naturally.

That winter, a very severe one, I contracted grippe while playing in Hamilton, Canada, and was confined to bed, unable, of course, to do my act. D. informed the manager that he would take my place on the show. He rushed back to the hotel and got a doctor.

The doctor was the handsomest man in Hamilton, a place of good-looking males. He was over six feet tall, and it seemed to me

the doctor made many more than the necessary number of professional visits.

I spent the entire week in bed. The doctor was in constant attendance upon me and refused to send me a bill for his services.

D. used to sit by my side and curl my hair with iron curlers while I was in bed. My hair was naturally curly, but it was a precaution—not to lose a natural advantage. I loved being rubbed with cocoa oil after a hot bath. I used it every night. Once D. brought cocoa butter by mistake and I smelled like a jungle monkey colony for a week.

In Newark, New Jersey, every night I was late coming home. Generally, it was about three o'clock in the morning when I opened my door. D. would lie in bed with his door open, and listen for the elevator to stop on that landing, but usually he fell asleep waiting.

One night, while we were still playing Newark, D. arrived at the theatre at seven o'clock and couldn't find me. A few minutes later he saw me walk in through the stage door escorted by a man with a very adoring look on his face. In ten minutes D. was in my dressing room playing a scene from Italian opera. "Who—who was *that*!"

"Just a friend," I said, "taking me to the theatre."

D. raged back and forth in my room. His eyes fell on an overcoat and derby hat on a chair.

"You're lying to me!" he said. "Who and *where* is he?"

I walked over to him and put my arms around his neck. "You let such little things upset you."

He wasn't mollified. He sputtered and swore fearful oaths of vengeance. Then he added: "I'm going to wait here and punch him in the big nose."

I sat down by my dressing table. "You'll be sorry."

There was a knock on the door. D. opened it.

"Pardon me. I left my hat and coat here." And in walked James J. Corbett, ex-Heavyweight Champion of the World, whom

I had met at a prizefight and whom I knew for many years after that. D. punched no noses that night.

D. would hunt all over any town we played to find the best food. There was a little restaurant in Norfolk we would go to after the theatre. One afternoon after the matinee, dressed as we were at the theatre, D. in a cutaway and me in a long black velvet dress, a small hat with a bunch of egrets and a big black fur coat with a belt around it, we were seated at a table. Two men walked in, discussing the vaudeville show at the Colonial.

"How did you like the blonde?" asked one.

"Just a dressed up chippie, that West girl."

I heard them and I looked at D. "What are you going to do about it?" I asked D.

"What do you want me to do?" D. said, ready to do it.

"That's up to you," I said.

D. got up from the table and walked over to the men. "You have insulted my companion." D. leaned over and led off with a clip right on the chin of the first offender. D. was very strong and he always hit first in a fight, and second and third if he could. The other diner picked up a dish of spaghetti and threw it at D. like a custard pie in a comedy. The spaghetti ran down the front of his dress shirt and spaghetti hung over his hair like red seaweed.

I began laughing. D. was no romantic sight. Chairs, dishes, and even tables were being hurled around the room. The two men fled, leaving D. sprawled on the floor, tomato sauce on his face. I went over and put my arms around him.

He said, "That is all I need. I have received my reward."

D. was a problem, however, outside of our personal, private relations. He mistrusted me in public life and in his Latin way often made life hazardous for me and my friends. In New York, we ate at a charming little Italian restaurant, Giolito's. One night a very handsome Italian, one of those tall, dark, curly-haired types, was seated at a table facing me. I noticed he always

seemed to be there when we were there, and always managed to sit so that he could see me.

The waiter skillfully managed to drop a note from him on my lap as he was brushing crumbs off the table with a napkin. I casually put the note in my slipper, since D. was very sharp about notes being passed to me. I didn't dare read it, or even put it in my purse, for he might become suspicious and search me—a thrilling experience in public—but not in the best of taste. Returning to the hotel, as we went to my suite I stumbled and the note slipped out of my shoe.

D. picked it up, shouted, and read it. He screamed, "Who gave you this?" acting for all the world like the outraged husband he wasn't.

"I never saw it before. Must have been one of the maids who dropped it."

D. read the note out loud: "I love you so much I can't stand it any more. I must meet you and talk to you. I don't care if that man is your husband."

I led him into the suite. "See, it was somebody else's note. You're not my husband."

It didn't convince D. He went over to Giolito's restaurant and found the waiter who gave me the note. "But it was a mistake," said the frightened waiter. "It was meant for someone else in the restaurant." D. scowled and only half-believed him.

A few nights later we were again dining at Giolito's and the same handsome Italian seated himself at a table facing us. The restaurant was on the ground floor of a brownstone house. I had the impression the stranger lived somewhere upstairs and came down when I was in the place. After dinner, I left the table to go upstairs to the powder room. I saw the Italian get up from his table and leave the restaurant. Sure enough, he only went outside to the street and walked up the front steps to the second floor of the restaurant. It was one of those houses with the dining room on the main floor.

"What is this all about?" I said.

"You know," he said, kissing my hand.

"Yes, I do."

"I live one flight up."

"I guessed that too."

He opened the door to his place and waited for me to come in. He spoke with an Italian accent almost as broad as D.'s. He talked quickly with gestures. "I thought you married because I see you so often with the same man. But I am glad to find out you are not married."

I backed away under his ardent closeness. "I see you meant every word in your note."

"I am ready to go to your friend and tell him that I love you, and ask him to give you up to me."

I felt this was too much. I pinned his arms down and said, "Look, there would be a murder if my friend knew you even meant the note for me."

"Murder doesn't scare Tony."

"Wait a few days and I'll figure out a way to see you."

"You don't merely say that to pacify me?"

I had, but I didn't say so. I left Tony hurriedly, and as I came down the stairs D. was bouncing on his way up. "Why are you gone so long? Did you talk to anyone?"

I said, "No."

The next day I got a telephone call from my friend Joseph M. Schenck, one of the giants of show business today, who even then was executive head of the Marcus Loew theatre chain, and an owner of Palisades Amusement Park, which was at its height as a fabulous and spectacular center of entertainment. He was a man of great personal charm, soft spoken, and possessed of a manner that made him attractive and easy to like.

He said, "Mae, I would like to see you, dear."

I said, "I'd like that too, but I don't think I can see you, at least not this week."

"Why not?"

"Some things have come up."

J. M. Schenck was sweet, but I had enough problems with D., so I told him I hoped to be able to see him in the near future. I soon found out that D. had bribed the phone operators to report all my calls to him. Oh, he was a mad, jealous one.

Ten minutes after I'd hung up the phone, D. came storming into my suite. "I accuse you of a romance with this Schenck."

"You're mad."

"I give you word for word the conversation of this Joseph M. Schenck."

"You've been spying."

"I'll go to Schenck's office!"

He did too, and pounded on the glass-topped desk until it broke and his hand was badly cut. Late that night, D. went to my home in Brooklyn and insisted that my parents give their consent to our marriage. "I feel that is the only way I can hold your daughter, for I kill the next man that tries to take her away from me!"

Papa said, "None of those Italian knife tricks."

Mother was terribly unhappy. "I'm afraid you'll harm Mae in a fit of jealous temper."

She asked me to break up with D.

"I'll try. I'll arrange with Bohm to get me out of town."

I left for Chicago the next day, both Latin lovers lost, but no blood shed and my throat uncut.

(I did not see D. again, from that time, 1916, until 1943 when he came to me in Hollywood when I was in pictures. He showed me an article he had written called "Mae West and Me." He told me he wanted to sell it to a magazine. I told him I was very displeased at the idea that he wanted to publish such an article. I said, "I have never wanted to flaunt my romances in public." D. said he wanted to be nice, and if I felt that way about it he'd forget about the article. And he gave it to me.)

It was not a sordid romance—but it was in a way madly comic. Both men loved me. And I was very attracted to them.

When America got into the war everybody entertained from platforms in the streets, selling Liberty Bonds. Irving Berlin wrote an Army camp show called *Yip Yip Yaphank*. George M. Cohan came up with "Over There." Others did "K-K-K-Katy" and "Mr. Zip with Your Hair Cut Just as Short as Mine." I put some flag waving into my act to match the torso waving. Many male acts enlisted. The stay-at-home draft boards had some popular songs banned as not being in the proper fighting spirit: "I Don't Want to Get Well, I'm in Love with a Beautiful Nurse." And any song with "Peace" in its title was called German propaganda.

I planned a new act and a new romance.

I see now it was a cruel thing I did to D., breaking without a word of parting, going off to Chicago. D. carried on like a Latin maniac, calling Mother at all hours of the night, begging to know where I was, trying to find me. He threatened to have the police search for me, then started drinking heavily, and finally ended up in a hospital, very ill with pneumonia. I wonder if it was as much hurt ego as lost love that drove him?

If I have made myself seem hard and casual, it was a defense I raised against all the world. I suffered. It was not an easy time for me. I was tempted to call D., but I had promised Mother I wouldn't call him and would try to forget him. I knew I couldn't marry D., since I was already married.

However, I am not one to brood in loneliness. I met—let me call him Rex—a spoiled, rich, baffling young man, in Chicago. Handsome, from a socialite family, a character out of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He fell in love with me and proposed. Then I really needed time to commune with myself.

But he was satisfied to wait a while. I felt that Mother would be happy with a marriage of this kind. I made up my mind to tell her about my dismal marriage to Wallace and have that annulled (I had been under legal age at the time of the marriage).

However, Rex, I found out, was very demanding. He didn't like me to wear any jewelry I had gotten from anyone else. A domineering personality, he wanted me to give up show business. "We will live a domestic life."

This was not to my liking. I never was, and am not now, the cottage apron type. Then he started arguing with me, and when I expect love I can't stand arguments. Who needs them. I lost interest in Rex pleasantly—little by little. I cut off his supply of me.

The thing that finished of the Rex romance was meeting a handsome opera singer. Dark, dashing, emotional, and part of my world of show business.

A local producer wanted to produce a big act for me with a jazz band. I had graduated from ragtime to the new music from New Orleans. Jazz suited me—I liked the beat and emotions. I visited the different clubs in Chicago, picking the best musicians and good-looking men, all I could find for the act. It had beautiful settings and gowns. The producer spent lavishly on the production. I was one of the first women stars to have an act with a jazz band. It was wild.

When I opened the act with the jazz band, the opera singer escaped from a hospital sick room to come to the theatre. He sat in a box and applauded enthusiastically. Later, as they took him back to the hospital, he said, "It was worth a relapse."

The producer started acting like a stallion in stud. I said, "I thought you were a business man?"

"Mae, why do you think I spent all this money and time on you?"

"To make more money. What else?"

"I fell in love with you."

"Fall out. I'm in love with an opera singer."

"Tenors are lousy lovers, Mae."

"We have a business contract—let's stick to *it*."

He gave in then, but later he wanted to travel with the company. I became upset about the situation and as soon as I could, I gave up the opera singer, left the act, and went back to New York.

I was sorry to leave. I enjoyed singing the new jazz songs—the low husky blues—the wild shouting laments of love and pleasure—the sad bounce of lovers and jazzmen and the music of honkey-tonks and hot spots.

In the wild emotional explosion of my youth I had experimented with a number of men. Everything had ended with me trying to hold up battered male egos, rather than needing to be consoled. I guess they never meant too much to me.

A man was now to come into my life who was to help guide most of my mature show business life. I met my mother's attorney, James A. Timony. She had engaged him for some of her legal business. He was big, handsome, with the build of the football player he had once been. Still young, he was already a prominent attorney in New York City, a power in politics, a hard man in court. He owned a baseball club and Hawthorne Field in Brooklyn. Jim and August Belmont, Jr., were among the very first to fly their own private planes. He had also invested \$35,000 in a racing car, which had been piloted to fame by the great Ralph DePalma in 1915.

After our first introduction Jim invited me out to dinner. We were attracted to each other at once, but wary as two tigers meeting for the first time. Jim phoned me every day. "You coming into town today?" If I said yes, he would add, "Save a dinner date for me."

It was obvious that he was infatuated with me, and I got to like him very much.

I went into Arthur Hammerstein's *Sometime*, music by Rudolf Friml, which opened at the Shubert on October 4, 1918. I played a lead opposite Ed Wynn and sang the hit song, "Any Kind of a Man." It was in this show that I introduced the "Shimmy."

Originally, this dance was called the "Shimmy-shawobble"; I first saw it wildly performed by Negro couples in a low colored café in Chicago's south side. There were two cafés there called Elite No. 1 and Elite No. 2. I was playing at the Majestic Theatre in Chicago, and one night after my performance a group of us from the show went slumming to hear more of the jazz music that was growing so popular.

We went to the Elite No. 1 and the colored couples on the dance floor were doing the "Shimmy-shawobble." Big black men with razor-slashed faces, fancy high yellows and beginners browns—in the smoke of gin scented tobacco to the music of "Can House Blues." They got up from the tables, got out to the dance floor, and stood in one spot, with hardly any movement of the feet, and just shook their shoulders, torsos, breasts and pelvises. We thought it was funny and were terribly amused by it. But there was a naked, aching sensual agony about it too.

The next day on stage at the matinee, the other actors were standing in the wings watching my act. I always did a dance for an encore. Then, inspired by the night before, during the dance music I suddenly stood still and started to shake in a kidding way, for the benefit of the actors in the wings backstage, recalling to them what we had seen the night before at the Elite No. 1. The theatre began to hum. It was amazing and daring, and it started a huge round of applause and whistles from the balcony. I had suddenly started a great new dancing fad in respectable circles.

At the evening performance I interpolated the "shimmy" into my act as a step routine, and perfected it again and again as an encore. The next week in Milwaukee, I introduced it there and

when asked "What do you call it?" I said, "The Shimmy Dance," not the Shimmy-shawobble.

I now put this dance into *Sometime*, and the town jumped for it. For the historian may I record that this was eight months before Sophie Tucker brought Gilda Gray to New York as a shimmy dancer. Bee Palmer also later made a reputation as a shimmy dancer. However, I never capitalized on the dance. I never wanted to be just identified as a shimmy dancer. Who wants to make a career of the shakes?

In *Sometime* I shook and stopped the show with the shimmy. The songs were good, and my part fine. The critics gave me rave notices. For example, Sime of *Variety*, considered the severest of critics, wrote in his review of *Sometime* . . . "Mae West played the role of Mayme Dean, a wise-cracking dame. . . . Mae West bowled them over with her songs and dance known in the joints as the Shimmy Shawobble. . . . Mae West stopped the show with her shimmy dance, then made a speech, then another." And like all actors, good reviews made me happy. Attacks on my shimmy only amused me.

I had made sure I would be prepared for encores to my best song. I went to the woman lyric writer, Rida Johnson Young, who had written the lyrics for the Friml music. It was a good song, "All I Want Is Just a Little Lovin'." It had the normal two choruses, but I didn't feel they were going to be enough. The lady lyricist, a refined type, was harassed and too busy with the show. Also she wasn't too anxious to comply with the request of just another woman. She said, "I'll try." She did give me an extra chorus, but she didn't get around to writing any more.

So I rewrote the lyrics for lots of ribald extra choruses, giving them different catch lines. The show's harassed dance director was too occupied to give me special instruction, so I hired a good dance director who needed work, and with him worked out special routines to go with each encore, including a step routine I had

learned from that marvelous little dancer and comic, Joe Frisco, in Chicago. It may seem brazen of me to have produced my own material, but I learned nothing is as easy to forgive on stage as success.

Coming to the theatre every night was exciting, as I looked up to see what other names were up in lights. John Barrymore appearing in Tolstoi's *Redemption*; Jane Cowl in *Information, Please*; Mary Nash in Willard Mack's *I.O.U.*; Irene Bordoni and H. B. Warner playing together in *Sleeping Partners*; Leo Ditrichstein, Cora Witherspoon and Mary Boland in *Matinee Hero*; Charles Coburn a big hit in a war comedy, *The Better 'Ole*; Ruth Chatterton's *Perkins*; and Nora Bayes in *Ladies First*.

Armistice Day was a reminder that the war had been a background to my young life in the theatre, a more bloody drama than any play, where the dead did not get up when the curtain came down. I had seen relatives and friends go off to battle, and had sorrowed to hear of close losses. I was happy we won but I was young and busy, and I excused myself with the old corny but true idea—the show must go on.

I mentioned Joe Frisco a few lines back. He died while I was writing this book. He was a legend of show business and a worthy one. I first saw him do his act in one of the Chicago night clubs I visited. At that time he worked in a Charlie Chaplin makeup and did a sensational original dance. He was a very clever dancer and went over big with the tough night club clientele. I was impressed with his easy yet original style of dancing. We got to talking and I asked him if he would work out a dance routine and teach it to me. While I was learning the routine, I advised him, "Try doing your act just with the derby hat and cigar, without the Chaplin makeup. As long as you use that makeup, good as you are, you're just a Chaplin imitator. And there are plenty of them."

"What else have I got?"

"A great dance and a great personality of your own."

Joe tried it out. He found that he went over just as big without the Chaplin imitation. One day a cop arrested him for jay-walking. Joe asked, "How f-fast was I going?"

Jim Timony and I were in Spike Kelly's café at Coney Island one evening; Joe Frisco was in the place. He came over to our table. I introduced him to Jim and we talked about our meeting in Chicago.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Joe stuttered a bit. "Well—it's—it's like this. I just come to New York, and am looking for a job. Do you—you know of anything?"

"Jim may help."

Jim asked Joe, "When can you give an audition?"

Frisco said, "I—could give one here—and—and—now—if it could be arranged."

Jim called over the manager of the café, and Joe Frisco did his act: dances, derby, cigar and jokes. And he was such a big hit with the patrons that the manager hired him immediately. Later Joe went into a Ziegfeld show and from then on became a musical comedy star and a vaudeville headliner. But his last years were unlucky. His demands frightened managers.

The motion pictures missed a good bet with Joe Frisco. He could have been a great screen comedian. But no one seemed to understand how, or were unable to find a way, to use his unusual talents. He remained a show business comic, not the public's.

One should never think negatively about anything, particularly about other human beings. This was one of the lessons I was learning then. I have always tried to improve other persons, and usually I have succeeded, with only Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, dissenting.

I remember a time when a fight promoter came to see me in

Hollywood, bringing with him a most perplexed-looking young man.

"What do you do?" I asked him.

By way of answer he pulled out of his pocket a few soiled and crumpled sheets of paper. On them were scrawled some of the loveliest poetry I had ever read—his.

He confessed he wanted to write songs.

I telephoned Gene Austin, a top songwriter, and also Sam Coslow, who was a composer of hit songs under contract to Paramount Studios, and made two appointments for the poet that very afternoon.

Soon he had written a Number One hit tune. Now he owns his own music publishing house. His name is Johnny Lang.

Johnny, at the time he came up to see me, appeared to be a very mixed-up young man, and the meeting proved to be the turning point in his life.

Sometime ran 283 performances on Broadway, and then went on the road. I decided against going on tour with it. I went back into vaudeville and then into a Shubert show, *The Mimic World*, with Jimmy Hussey, Cliff Edwards, El Brendel. It was a revue with a lot of sketches, blackouts and production numbers. As usual, I made it my business to look through all the material of the show. I selected my songs and sketches, changing lines for an added punch.

We were to open in Philadelphia. The two big name women stars refused to go into the same show with me. They wanted J. J. Shubert to let me out. One said, "We couldn't go into the show this way. We wouldn't get far following what Mae West is doing these days. Shaking her sex."

"I'll keep Mae, thank you, ladies."

I did a slinky vampire scene, and also played in a black hair-

piece, doing the "Dance of Vanity," satirizing the Russian actress Nazimova.

My shimmy made headlines so I had a hilarious skit called *The Shimmy Trial* in which I came before the judge for doing the naughty shimmy dance, and it was hard for an actress to follow me.

J. J. Shubert said to me, "All these girls are afraid to appear in the same show with you. Your personality is too exciting and different. I guess we will put you in a show as the sole woman star."

"That would be great," I said.

We opened in New York at the New Century Roof, August 15, 1921. The show was a big success. Opening night saw Jack Dempsey, the World's Heavyweight Champion, and his manager Jack Kearns out front in uncomfortable tight evening clothes. After the performance they came backstage. Kearns asked, "Would you care to do a motion picture with Jack? We would like to make a screen test with you and Dempsey this week."

Dempsey was a shy looking tough young guy, solid but graceful, and his muscles appealed to me. I said, "Why not let me think it over?"

Dempsey said, "Sure. Sure." He didn't talk much then.

Kearns said, "Our plan is to make the screen test and then go out on a series of personal appearances in vaudeville, and when we reach the West Coast, make the picture. We feel that the Champ would be a sure draw for the suck—people on this vaudeville tour, and that you, Miss West, with your own classy style of performance, doing the shimmy dance, songs and other routines, would attract the sophisticates."

They made me a very good offer.

Later that week we made the screen test at Pathé Studio, uptown on 168th Street. The picture was to be called *Daredevil Jack*, and the test was a love scene. I stopped Dempsey in the middle and said, "Look, Champ, I won't break—hold me tighter."

"This way?"

"You're learning, Champ."

The screen test turned out great. However, when Jim Timony heard about the proposed vaudeville tour, he objected strongly. "It's on the Pantages Circuit, Mae, and they are doing three shows a day. That's too strenuous for you."

I would have liked to go on the tour, but I gave Dempsey and Kearns my refusal. They went on tour on the Pentages time, but they never did make the picture.

The Twenties were roaring already, but they had just got warmed up, weren't in high yet. Offstage was Al Capone and the mob, for the repeal of drinking didn't sit well on the American stomach. Show business was soon invaded by the hoods and bootleggers, the big-time sports, who had money and little taste for art or travel or opera. Chorus girls, night clubs, big profits, deals, and the glitter and glow of show business appealed to them. Soon Broadway and every theatre district in any American city or town was ringed by speakeasies—illegal but protected bars—in sedate-looking houses where a bloodshot eye peered out at one through a slot and *any* word was the password.

A Florida land boom began, and corner lots under water sold as well as on dry land. New words came into popularity: "Dumb Dora," "clucks," "sheik," "drug store cowboy," "Teapot Dome." Leopold and Loeb committed the first great crime of the Twenties, to be followed by the Halls-Mills murder of a minister and choir singer under a Lovers Lane apple tree. Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray sash-weighted Mr. Snyder to death; Ruth was secretly photographed by the New York *Daily News* burning in the electric chair under the delirious title: RUTH FRIES IN CHAIR.

Show business, I saw, had a hard time trying to keep ahead of the headlines, and still be as entertaining. But we all tried; it was

the decade of everybody trying. Earl Carroll tried. He got a show girl named Joyce Hawley to take a nude bath in poor wine at a backstage party, and he went to Atlanta for that. America was still not too sure a bathtub was needed in every home. The show was stolen entirely for weeks by an act five thousand years old when they opened the tomb of King Tut in Egypt. Joe Frisco said to me, "That's show biz. A comeback."

I Make My First Real Play



I BECAME a writer by the accident of needing material and having no place to get it. At least not the kind of writing I wanted for my stage appearances. I am an example—rare I hear—of a writer who performed her function perfectly, in the sense that I was both the creator and the consumer of my own basic literary material. To become a professional playwright with a half-dozen popular plays to my credit was not my intent at first.

The letter “I” appears very often on these pages. That is because I have been given the liberty, or have taken it, of telling my own story in my own way—and I like a story that takes its time. Yes, I first had to create myself, and to create the fully mature image I had to write it out to begin with. I admit that my writing is only for the theatre, that my ideas and my texts were from the first for the stage, through the secret doors of my personal life. But no one has clearly created himself in the public eye as I have, unless it’s George Bernard Shaw or Flagpole Kelly.

I began writing by tinkering with the lines assigned me, written by others, and I was soon on the path of beginning my own texts with just an idea, a picture, a costume or a song, and developing

an entire act. I wrote the way I performed: boldly and loudly, I suppose, with an applauding dash and ironic overtones. But always with an awareness of my worth.

I had a proper understanding which grew stronger; that behind the symbol I was becoming, there was much good material for drama, satire and some kind of ironic comment on the wars of sexes and the eternal engagement and grappling between men and women in a battle that never ends. I did not perhaps treat the subject as seriously as Havelock Ellis, or as deeply as Sigmund Freud, Adler, Jung or Dr. Kinsey, but I think if we all could have sat down and discussed the subject fully, my ideas would have been listened to with some sense of awe. They may have been the generals, but I was in the front lines—out in an emotional No Man's Land, engaged in dangerous hand-to-hand, lip-to-lip raiding parties. I have always found it's personal experience that counts, not making fever charts.

The first act I wrote entirely myself ran eighteen minutes: it included a sketch about a temperamental French prima donna followed by a song in my own style, with an encore of how a dramatic actress would do the same song. I, of course, had other songs in the act.

Harry Richman was my pianist. With his cane, straw hat and lisp, he became one of the great personalities of the Roaring Twenties. He was a pretty good piano player. In my prima donna sketch he played an impresario, and it was the first time he had ever spoken lines on a stage. Harry was very good. Harry also played piano selections while I was off-stage making costume changes. Later he became a singer and owner of his own Club Richmond.

The act was a hit and Mr. E. F. Albee of the booking offices offered me a three-year contract. I hesitated about signing. J. J. Shubert was looking for a play for me, and my newest interest was to be a dramatic star on Broadway.

The opening date scheduled in the contract was a jump to San

Francisco. I didn't like to travel. I was too high-strung to adjust myself easily to new surroundings in hotels, on those old un-air-conditioned trains. In new hotels I would spend hours changing furniture and lamps around. I couldn't sleep on trains, when cinders fell all night on warm sheets and elephants seemed to try to crush the cars at way stations. Mother had conditioned me to the importance of ample rest to keep looking one's best. So I told Mr. Albee, "I'm not signing any long term contract, and only accepting bookings closer to home."

By 1923 I had perfected my act, and played it with Harry Richman at the piano for a year and a half. Harry and I then went into the *Ginger Box Revue*, which was scheduled to open at the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York. Harry was expanding, had a collection of canes, straw hats and new songs, and was now a three-way performer, singing, dancing and acting.

At a rehearsal of this show I first met Dave Apollon. He had just arrived in this country, after some hardships, and was in the show. He was a fine mandolin player and Russian dancer. I first saw him dressed in a very tight-fitting green tweed suit that looked as if it had been made for a smaller brother, high button shoes, and a high Hoover collar. He was short but slender, with a round elf's face and a turned-up nose over a mocking mouth. He had a sour-cream heavy Russian accent, and a very amusing way of expressing himself in a fractured English almost like double-talk.

Dave was very funny, I thought, but in the show he just played the mandolin and did a short dance. I couldn't help being amused by him and I would have him come to me so that I could ask him questions just to hear him mangle the language. I would try not to laugh out loud, just inwardly, and somehow everything became funnier that way. When Dave Apollon would start talking it would break me up inside.

He'd ask, "Whut suz funnik I'm saying please to tell me?"

Some of the other actors and the director started to listen. Dave always had a half-scared look on his face, as if he were

conscious of his inability to communicate fully through his Rasputin English. And afraid he might say the wrong things.

I said to him, "Dave, with your mannerisms, voice, and puzzled expression that seems to struggle to understand what is said, you make me scream with laughter. What would you be able to do to an audience?"

"But no thank you—I serious minded fella, this mandolin and dancing very serious for me is enough."

In the show I was to play Circe, that sexy siren of Greek mythology who turned her lovers into swine. I told the director, "Dave Apollon would be great in this scene as a Russian lover. Give him the part."

"If you can get him to read lines."

I did. Dave studied and he was terribly funny at rehearsals. We opened in South Norwalk, Connecticut, to break in the show. The producer told me, "Mae, the scenery doesn't fit the theatre. It was built for a smaller theatre, the Greenwich Village Theatre."

"What do we do?"

"The opening night audience may be greatly disappointed with the show if we do most of the scenes before a simple black velvet drop. I'll get a speech ready for the manager to make to the audience apologizing for the lack of scenery and begging their indulgence."

The idea shocked me. "It would be fatal to the show for the manager to tell the audience that the scenery doesn't fit the stage and make excuses. The house is sold out, packed, and at big prices."

"It will be hell to pay when they see there's no scenery for the show, Mae."

"The material in the show is good, and fine entertainment. It would be a great shame for anything to ruin the opening."

"Got any ideas?"

"Well, get Dave Apollon to go out before the curtain, in a spotlight, in his own tight little green street suit, and with that

borscht dialect he should really be funny telling them about the scenery."

He captured Dave, fed him hot tea, patted his back, and said he *could* do it. He said weakly, "It was better with the Czar and the lousy pogroms."

Dave finally did go out on the stage to make the announcement, and the more he got tangled up in the English language, the more scared and bewildered he looked, the more the audience howled. He became so screamingly funny the audience doubled up in their seats. They applauded madly, thinking it was all a part of the original show. He came off popeyed. "I sweating like a hoss," he said.

That was the beginning of a career for Dave Apollon. He was getting forty dollars a week, but the fact that he could make an audience laugh just by talking got him a raise that night. He later became a headliner at the Palace Theatre, and even a master of ceremonies.

He said years later, "Mae, me getting a few thousand a week instead of just playing the mandolin like the number two act on a bill. Is America—is great."

He was one of the first acts to be kept at the Palace Theatre for a run of six consecutive weeks. Dave's career gave me a feeling I had as yet untried talents with men. Up to this time my interests in men had been of a more private nature.

I told Dave, "It shows what a man can do if he just talks."

"I acquire quite the fortune making people laugh at the way my dialect bends English language. Today my greatest worry, Mae, is that now I been in this country so long I losing my accent. Every once a while I have to brush up my bad English and thicken the Russian accent yet!"

Harry Richman and I were going to return to vaudeville after this show—but I was offered 50 per cent interest in a night club

to appear. I don't care for night clubs, but I suggested that Harry take the club engagement. He did, and his success in that field of entertainment was earned. He is a great personality and is still starring today in Las Vegas.

Piano players were no problems when he left. I continued to play the act with different pianists: Leon Flato, Jack Belmont, and others. I was still looking for the right play for myself. J. J. Shubert was still hopeful.

Father had been busy with one of his projects. He said to me, "What kind of a play are you looking for?"

"When the right one comes along, I'll know it."

"That's the easy way to think, Mac."

"How do you suggest I should think?"

"Mind you, I don't know show business."

"That's very true," I said.

"But I know the public."

"The prizefight public."

"Why worry about a play, Mac? Let the producers find the play and do it. Then if it doesn't turn out too good, it will be their fault, not yours. You can always try another one."

"That is just what I don't want to do. Who ever gets two real chances? I want to be sure I do it the first time. The play has got to be right for me, or I'd rather not do it at all."

Mother understood me better. She said, "You always change all your parts, Mac, and rewrite your songs. You wrote your act. If you tried hard enough, you could write a play for yourself."

Mother continued to encourage me to write a play. I don't need much encouragement when I want to do a thing. I wanted to write a play.

I really began to think.

The story I wanted occurred to me one day as I was riding along New York's Tenth Avenue, which runs close to the Hudson River docks and is the sailors' boulevard.

The fashion for hats trimmed with birds-of-paradise had died

when the importation of the feathers was made illegal. Like most other out-of-date styles it had been taken up by the chippies of the waterfront. Sailors would smuggle in the bird skins, for they could easily get to first base—if not further—with a floozie by giving her this *démodé* and otherwise unobtainable ornamentation.

As I rode along I noticed several of these shabby charmers strolling on the arms of their sailor lads and wearing shoddy felt hats ironically bedizened with the gorgeous plumage of those tropical birds.

My opening situation was set. The play would be about such a girl who ensnared a sailor who had brought her a bird-of-paradise.

I began to write in pencil, on assorted scraps of paper, old envelopes, anything with a blank surface. I only knew two rules of playwriting: write about what you know, and make it entertaining. So that's why I wrote it the way I did, on a subject I was interested in—sex.

My script at last was finished. I read it to Mother and Jim Timony. After hearing it, Jim shouted, "This is too damn good. We won't give it to the Shuberts! We'll do it ourselves."

Jim and Mother immediately began to make plans to finance the play.

I didn't leap to the position of producer at once. I felt obligated to let J. J. Shubert read it, as his efforts to find a play for me had inspired me to do my own text. I felt he was entitled to see the results of my wrestling match with the muses.

I had copies made of the play, and sent a script with a short note to the Shubert office. The play department sent it back with an even shorter note. So we went on with our own production plans to do my play about a Montreal prostitute named Margie La Mont, and the obstacles she had to overcome to reform.

Later, after the play had opened in New York, and was a success, Mr. J. J. told me regretfully, "You know my damn play depart-

ment never gave me the script for my personal evaluation. It's my fault for hiring a Harvard fella to read for me. All he wants to do is Elizabethans!"

I had a play, and the production money was being set up. The next step was to catch a good stage director. "Easy," said Jim. "There must always be many more good directors just waiting for a play to direct than there are good plays waiting for directors, mustn't there?"

"We'll find out."

Jim took some of my manuscript to his office, and one of the girls typed up copies for me. After I had the first act revised, the girls in his office started asking Jim for more of the play. "They're anxious to read it," he told me. "The girls are getting a big kick out of typing this script. They laugh out loud over it."

"Tell them to save it for the theatre."

I was still looking for a director. I wanted a good, tough, seasoned stage director, with all the known staging tricks. I felt I had a lot of new tricks to add to his. I made an appointment one day with one of the top Broadway directors, a man who had many big hits to his credit, and a head to match.

I had placed a pen name, "Jane Mast" on the manuscript as the author of the play. The director I wanted read the first act, then glanced at me with no comment and started on the second act. He stopped, sat up and said, "Who wrote this?"

"It's there some place."

He turned back to the title page and looked at the name. "Jane Mast? She's a new one on me; and the play is a new one on me, too. You have everything in here but the merry-go-round. I don't get it. There are characters in the first act that don't come back in the second act."

"Why should they? They're busy."

He looked at me closely and said, "I'd like to take this with me and study it carefully. Perhaps suggest some changes."

"I don't want it changed."

"Could I just offer some suggestions?"

"I'm sorry, that's the only copy we have free and we have other appointments for readings."

"If you could send me a copy I'll give it some time."

"Some other time. Sorry."

He left, as I had an appointment with another top director that afternoon. He was a slower reader, a finger wetter. He read the play and, with a look of surprise mingled with pain, asked, "*Who* wrote this?"

I said, tired of games, "It's mine."

"My dear child," he said, shaking his head like a toy doll, "this is a salacious play. Furthermore, you're going to have a jazz band in the second act and the star sings and dances with it? That is never done. You could have a few string instruments playing off-stage, and a tenor singing a love song off-stage, while the star does a love scene on stage. But to sing and dance to a jazz band on stage, you kill all your dramatic scenes."

"It would if you directed the play."

"I'm rejected!"

"You've done some fine plays, but you're mired in your own ways and it would be too hard for me to change you to my ideas. I know I'm doing things in this play that have never been done before. Thank you for your advice."

"Don't worry over your play, Miss West. No one will do it your way."

Jim began to worry too. He said, "These men should know."

"No, Jim, these men are old-fashioned. We need a young director to do this. A man with—"

Jim shrugged. "Where do we find him?"

"We have one more appointment with a director named Edward Elsner. He has a great reputation, a Charles Frohman director."

"What's he done?" Jim asked.

"Henri's Bernstein's *The Thief*, Maude Adams in *Peter Pan*, Pauline Fredericks in *Within the Law*, the Barrymores in a play about Queen Elizabeth, and many more."

"Is he for us?"

"He's worked with stars like Julia Marlowe, Gaby Deslys, Margaret Illington, Madame Simone; and in London he staged Baroness Orczy's play *Unto Caesar*. He's also a playwright and in his younger days did the stage adaptation of Ouida's famous novel *Under Two Flags*."

"Well, *that* one I liked. We'll see him."

We went to see a show directed by Elsner. It was a beautifully written play, with fine actors; a highly dramatic story of World War I. I appreciated all the good qualities about this show, but I didn't enjoy the play as entertainment. We were seated in a box, looking over the audience. It was an elderly audience, and a very conservative one.

I said to Jim, "This man will be like the rest of them. He just won't understand me and my play."

During the second act intermission, Edward Elsner was introduced to us. He looked like something out of an Edgar Allan Poe story dusted off. He had his black overcoat draped over his shoulders like a cape, and held it together in front with one long set of fingers. He shook hands softly with me, and smiled a quick Mephisto's smile. He had very thin lips like surgical scars, and these he drew back over his dry teeth in a smile which he turned on and off. It was a quick smile and you could miss it if you winked.

"My dear Miss West, I'm looking forward to reading your play tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock at the office." He squeezed my hand a little as if feeling my pulse, gave me a new, quick, satanic smile and disappeared. I half expected a puff of smoke, an odor of brimstone and the clap of a trap door.

Jim said, "This guy is a good act in himself."

"I've made up my mind, even if he doesn't like my play or understand it. It isn't going to make any difference to me. I'm sure of my play, and sure of myself. I haven't read all those playscripts offered me these last months for nothing. *My play* is fresh and new and exciting. It's different in every way. And if it is directed the way I have in mind I know it can't miss."

Jim said, "People are watching us. Shhhh."

The next day Mr. Edward Elsner arrived on time at the office. He reached into his pocket for his glasses, only to find they were broken. "Well, this is a fine thing to happen. My dear Miss West, without my glasses I just can't read a line."

"I can see that."

"However, I have another pair of glasses at home. I'll phone and have them sent over."

I said, "Why bother? Shall I read it for you?"

"Oh, would you? That would be fine."

"Sit down," I said, opening the script.

I began reading. Whenever I came to a line or a situation that called for a reaction of some kind, or a laugh, I would glance up at him, and there it would be, that tight-lipped, quick smile. He even laughed aloud during the first act, like Dracula asking the price of veal chops.

I felt, however, he had some idea of what I was trying to do. At the end of the first act, I said, "Now get ready for Act Two. I have a jazz band in that act, and I sing and dance to it."

He said without rippling a face muscle, "That should be very amusing."

I went into the Second Act. At the end of it, I asked him, "Shall I read the Third Act, or just explain it?"

He stood up, cracked his knuckles, and said, "I want to hear *every word, every syllable*. By all means, read it. Read it!"

I did. At the end of the reading, he stood up again and shouted, "By God! You've done it! You've got it! This is it!"



Myself, aged six months.



Baby Mac



My mother, Matilda Doelger West.



My father, John West.



John West as a child.

In Rudolf Friml's *Sometime*,
1918.



Singing for the Yale boys.



My sister, Beverly West.



My brother,
John West.



Shubert's "Dance of Variety" on the Century Roof in the twenties.



In *Diamond Lil* at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, 1947.



In *Diamond Lil* in 1949.



Diamond Lil relaxes
in her Golden Swan
bed.



Jack La Rue and I in *Diamond
Lil*.



As Mlle. Fifi in *Every Day's a Holiday*, 1938.

Jim entered the office and looked at the director of the Barrymores and then at me.

I said, "I *think* Mr. Elsner is our man."

With a director hired I moved quickly into production before I could change my mind. I was always ready to take a chance, but encouraging myself was not my favorite job when I was spending Mac West's time and money. I didn't want a full producer's responsibility; writing and acting were enough for me at the time.

Jim got C. W. Morgenstern, a veteran producer, to produce with us, and we called the agencies for actors. The director and I looked at actors together: good ones, bad ones, tall ones, short ones. We saw eye to eye mostly on every actor we hired. Soon all the business part of the show was completed and we went into rehearsals. It can't be written about—the slow, hard work, the days and nights in a cold empty theatre, the dust, work lights, confusion, run-throughs and the agony of preparing a play.

I found I could do my best thinking in the presence of Elsner. He had the rare power of making you create. During rehearsals, he would say to me, "Now right here—we need *something*. . . ." He would stop and look at me with his Edgar Allan Poe stare.

I'd say, "Do you mean the first walk-on—new lines?"

"Yes—it's not quite—it has to be . . . mmm . . . rrruff! It's got to reach a height. But with no dialogue."

He would gesture, with his arm upraised, as if I were at once to pull rabbits out of a hat.

The first time he did this to me I almost said: "Tell me exactly what you mean or what you want, and I'll be able to write it."

But I didn't ask. I began to think, and in a minute I had what he wanted. I soon realized this was one of his tricks—to make me think. He never took the easy idea, he hunted for the surprise, the

unexpected. Good theatre is not what is expected, but what surprises. Good plays assault us and poor ones let us alone. Elsner wanted something original from me. I saw he felt if he gave me the idea it would be good enough, but it would throw me off and perhaps spoil something of value that I intended to use later in the play.

After the second week of rehearsals, things "were shaping up." Elsner left me alone to make the changes I felt. I would ask, "What shall I do here?" meaning physical action. He would say, "Just what you are doing, the arms out, the slow sway of the hips. That's great."

"I didn't do anything I don't usually do."

"Oh, yes you did."

"I was unaware of it."

He would get me to repeat the action, and I saw the sensual mockery of my walk. The ironic comedy.

"I want natural acting, and your original mannerisms, and a particular sultry walk and good timing. You're not aware of all these qualities yet. You don't know you have them. I recognize them, and I'm not going to change them. Just highlight them."

I became aware that this man was able to project my character by letting me develop it myself. I had never worked like this before.

During the third week of rehearsal, he said, "I've directed a good many women, and each one of these stars had different qualities that made them stars. What is it? Each one had an outstanding manner, a little better than the usual actor's, and that made them stars."

"What have I got?" I asked.

"You have a quality—a strange amusing quality, that I have never found in any of these other women. You have a definite *sexual* quality, gay and unrepressed. It even mocks you personally."

I said, rather puzzled, "A self-mocking sex quality? I mean, does it overshadow the part?"

His Dracula mask grinned. "You reek with it. You have it all over you."

"All over me?"

"In your eyes, your mouth, your voice, your body movement."

"That's just my vaudeville style."

"Don't lose it. It's natural with you. You don't have to act it, or try to be that way. You are just *it*."

I said, "That's fine. Let's go on with the play."

I still did not fully understand myself as an actress. I had written the play as an amusing melodrama, and had somehow tailored it for my public character. I hadn't expected it to be so easy. The fourth and last week of rehearsals began and we hadn't decided on a final title for the show. "The Albatross" was a working title. I expected to get a better one. I had several other titles in mind. Then finally I decided a one-word title would be best for my show, after hearing Elsner repeat "Sex" so often regarding my personality.

I told Elsner, "I have just decided to keep a one-word title for the show."

"A one-word title would be the thing. What one word have you decided on?"

"The title is *SEX*."

"*SEX*? If we only dared use it!" He gave one of his ghoulish laughs.

"We will," I said.

Now we were this far along, I began to wonder at my nerve. A new play, a new legitimate actress, a title *SEX*, and a theme not at all drawing-room comedy.

When the show was ready for a break-in date we found it difficult to get a downtown theatre. There were many hit shows on Broadway that season; the only theatre available was Daly's at

Sixty-third Street near Broadway. All of the legitimate theatres were in the area from Thirty-ninth Street to Forty-eighth Street, between Sixth Avenue and Eighth Avenue. Daly's Theatre was out of the way; could we draw people that far uptown?

Harry Cort, who managed Daly's Theatre, saw one of our rehearsals, and said, "I'm interested in the show on a percentage deal."

"That means you like it," I said.

"It means I'm willing to gamble. I can take a loss, or make money."

We secured a break-in date for the show, a Friday and Saturday in New London, Connecticut. The show's paper (tickets) was printed and we went up to New London as many a show has done before, stepping high, feeling light inside and having bad dreams. It was a theatre that had been turned into a picture house, but when a play came in, the motion pictures would be temporarily halted. An old theatre, with two balconies and box seats, and musty drapes. We had a dress rehearsal, with the scenery and costumes.

In the late afternoon we talked to the house manager, a senile old dolt with a not-very-pleasant voice, a rather surly personality, and a touch of palsy. He came backstage and Jim asked, "How are things coming at the box-office?"

"Hey?"

"The box-office. How's it coming along?"

"Mister."

"Yes?"

"Not coming at all. That title's scaring them away. Nobody in this town will buy tickets for a show with the title *SEX*." He grumbled, "You better change that title right away. We don't talk about sex hereabouts, and we don't put it on signs."

I said, "That's a title for Broadway."

"Well, better think of something less on people's minds."

Before curtain time the manager came back. "Just as I said,

they ain't coming in. About eighty people in the theatre tonight, and you can blame it on that New York title."

"I asked, "Where is the audience—in the orchestra?"

He said, "Nope, they're all over the house."

"Get them all down front, so I can see them."

"Give people that bought gallery seats the first row orchestra?"

"No, give them the third row."

"That is still giving them a three-dollar seat for eighty-five cents."

"The trouble with you up here is you have no sense of humor."

"I can't change the house policy just to be funny." He moaned and walked away slowly.

I told Jim, "Go out there and get all those people sitting in the front rows."

"But why? It will be too empty."

"We'll never get any reaction on this show if they're spread all over the theatre like they are. I want real faces down front."

"This old guy isn't for it."

"Tell him, Jim," I said, "that we won't raise the curtain until he does. And I mean it."

Being a lawyer, Jim liked trouble. He went after the old boy and eventually, with much dropping of hats and coats, all the audience—what there was of them—were down front. Eighty-five people.

I made up, trying to think of nothing but my part. The curtain went up to the eighty-five people. Every reaction I expected and wanted took place; every laugh that I intended, I got. The show went over very well. Among this meager audience were two top drama critics from New York, and also reporters from newspapers in New London.

We took our bows, got good hands. I went to take off my makeup. My colored maid said, "What there was, they didn't sit there just with their faces open."

"They liked it?" I said.

Jim came in. "Well, it played fine. It's a hit."

"Wait till we see some reviews."

The director came in, his bat coat on. "Needs a little tightening but it's good. It's great. Don't tell me, I know the critics haven't been to bat yet. They'll like it."

The next day they did. The reviews pleased us all.

I said, "Except that we're losing pots of money so far, we're in great shape."

Jim said, "Wait till word of mouth spreads it around."

I refused to be cheered up. I had never played to eighty-five customers before.

The next dismal day was Saturday. We had a matinee. I drove to the theatre with Jim and Morgenstern, the co-producer, in a taxi. There was a line of people around the block—mostly sailors—two and three deep.

I said, "What's happening? Is a war on? What are all these sailors doing here?"

Jim said, "There must be a naval base in this town."

"New London?" I said. "Why, of course."

As we got out we saw they were all buying tickets. Inside the theatre the manager had sent backstage for all the chairs he could possibly get. "Something has happened to this town," he said. "We're putting people up in the boxes which don't have any chairs because there hasn't been a box seat sold for the past ten years."

"Get all the chairs you can," I said.

"The stagehands that live near the theatre have gone home for their dining room chairs. I'll hold the show until 3:15."

"And you said it was a bad title."

"I forgot about sailors."

Everyone that could add was busy selling tickets; they weren't prepared for such a big crowd.

The cheering sailors packed the balcony and gallery, and brave civilians packed the box seats and orchestra. Mouth-to-mouth advertising and good notices had done it.

The show was a riot when it played to a packed house. Harry Cort came up to New London for the night show. The house manager begged Cort to let the show stay in New London for a few weeks or even one week. But Cort wanted the show. "As soon as I can get it to New York," he said.

"Is there room?" I asked Cort.

"I took Earl Carroll's *White Cargo* out. Paid them off for next week."

Jim said, "It's your money."

SEX, More Sex, and the Cooler



WHAT KIND of New York had I been preparing *SEX* for? Legs Diamond, a gangster and blonde chaser, made bigger headlines being used as a public target than a great many Broadway shows. It was a wild, raucous period in American drama, and we all tried to give the theatre patrons the feel and taste of the times. Hecht and MacArthur had written the great fairy tale of American newspapermen, a shoddy drunken lot at times, in *The Front Page*. Plays like *Chicago*, *Broadway*, *The Racket* and others showed that crime was a national sport like baseball, and impregnating in rumble seats of Packards.

It was a time of night clubs, fancy speaks, and cabarets, and I usually appeared on the town in my diamonds and with my men, when publicity called for it. The Lido, Flamingo and Silver Slipper were the finest places for meeting the best and worst people.

We opened in New York at Daly's Theatre on Thursday, April 26, 1926. The show was a sensation to the opening night audience. But the newspapers wouldn't print our ads in their drama pages

(or anywhere else in the paper). Not with that word "Sex." An editor said: "Up until now the word "sex" has been taboo, except when used in such harmless phrases as 'the fair sex' or 'the opposite sex.' *The New York Times* will not change now."

I suggested that we keep the "snipers," the men that go around pasting up show posters, for the run of the show, continuing to let them flood the town, all the five boroughs, with one-sheets and three-sheets of the show. The boys really went to work. Jim said, "Any person who stopped anywhere to look in a window would be lucky if he didn't get a one-sheet of *SEX* pasted on his back."

That winter New York taxis carried a sign reading: HEATED—MAE WEST IN "SEX"—*Daly's 63rd Street Theatre*.

Walter Winchell called attention to it and us in his column. And I was a star in a legitimate theatre.

In the second week of the show, Chanin Theatre Corporation, owners of several theatres downtown, offered Harry Cort fifty thousand dollars to let us out of our contract with him and bring the show into one of its theatres. Harry Cort refused the offer. "I took a chance," he said. "I'll take more."

SEX ran 375 performances. The show was such a hit that they were getting ten dollars for orchestra seats for the first six rows. At this time \$2.80 was top price for dramatic shows.

A great many men entered my life. They first appeared as admirers of my play or acting, but stayed to be amused, or become serious. A chorus boy from one of the revues I had been in for the Shuberts brought two men backstage. One of them, an actor, was very good looking, with a deep, rich voice, and an unusual vital personality, so impressive that I wanted to know him much better. He was introduced as Mr. Dupont.

When the men left my dressing room, the chorus boy came back. "Dupont is out of his ever-loving mind about you, Mae. He is just utterly mad about you." Then he rushed out like an elf.

The next day I got a lovely bouquet of flowers from Dupont.

For a week I couldn't get this man out of my mind. I couldn't forget his voice; I couldn't forget his personality. I wanted to know him better. When I am attracted to a man, I am like an Amazon in battle; I hit out in all directions.

The following week I had a party at my apartment after the show. The chorus boy phoned, "I am in the lobby with Dupont and would like to flit up and say hello."

"Sure, come up."

I got more than I wanted. I found out that Dupont had been married and divorced, and had a child. And he was also bisexual. I hadn't yet read Kraft-Ebing or Freud. I had grown up in a world of odd men and women. Show business in its present form couldn't exist without them. Some of our greatest playwrights are homosexuals, and so are many of our actors, directors and producers.

But Dupont surprised me. There was nothing about him but a he-man charm. I wasn't too familiar with this phase of sex. The homosexuals I had met were usually boys from the chorus of some of the shows I'd been in. I looked upon them as amusing and having a great sense of humor. They were all crazy about me and my costumes. They were the first ones to imitate me in my presence. I suspected something wrong in Dupont; his being in the company of the types he was with when I met him. I began to study the problem. I read Freud, and Ulrich, who called them *Urnings*. I learned a lot about the yearnings of urnings.

I had no sexual desire for Dupont but I remained impressed with his personality. I asked myself: For what reason does this man interest me? Is it only interest as material for a play? Do I dare use it for dramatic purpose?

I was still playing in *SEX*. But I had to write this new play. Some force that was perverse, some strange thing, was compelling me to write it. I didn't understand.

There are many things in a person's life that, no matter how one tries, can never be fully explained. When I began to write my homosexual play, *THE DRAG*, I felt a strong compulsion to put

down a realistic drama of the tragic waste of a way of life that was spreading into modern society at a time when any mention of it was met by ordinary people with a stare of shocked horror.

Oscar Wilde had gone to prison only a generation or so before for his effrontery of even hinting at his passions for other men. There had been discreet society scandals in Newport and other rich pleasure places here. But even the most daring, lurid editors of Sunday scandal sheets turned away from explaining or reporting any of it. There had been a homosexual upheaval at the court of the German Kaiser before World War I. And everyone who had been to England knew of the growth of the problem, resulting in the tainting of the English public (private) schools, the Army and the theatre.

The American stage was soon no better. The entire Broadway theatre was filled with homosexuals in every creative field from costumes to playwriting. But when I first tried to set the truth down in a play I was almost alone. The only two plays that had tried were romantic, not realistic, and had been closed. A woman character got a bouquet of violets from another woman, in a French drama, *The Captive*, on Broadway, and the play was closed as "an indecent display of Lesbianism." *The Green Bay Tree*, a romantic play delicately and artfully touching homosexual relationship, was no great success, for it never fully stated its theme directly.

My own desire to write a realistic play on such a daring subject was part of my stubborn character, which never resisted a challenge. And some mysterious, subconscious drive to see what kind of a drama I could make of it. I had no personal emotional relations to the ideas of the theme. I had worked with male homosexuals in the theatre, but I myself had almost no contact with women at all. I preferred male company at all times. I never had any private interest in a woman as a love object, and would have recoiled in horror at myself if I had. Yet here I was blithely writing a play that could only make trouble for me.

Was I a crusader? At the time I would have denied it. And perhaps I have never fully understood my motives when I wrote *SEX, THE DRAG*, and other plays that brought down the howl of the too pious.

I have already explained that I freely chose the kind of life I led because I was convinced that a woman has as much right as a man to live the way she does if she does no actual harm to society. I saw no indecency or perversion in the normal private habits of men and women.

I now began to probe into society's secrets. I have always hated the two-faced, the smoother-over folk—the people who preach loudly one way of life, and then do something in private that they're against in public. In many ways homosexuality is a danger to the entire social system of western civilization. Certainly a nation should be made aware of its presence—without moral mottoes—and its effects on children recruited to it in their innocence. I had no objections to it as a cult of jaded inverts, or special groups of craftsmen, shrill and involved only with themselves. It was its secret anti-social aspects I wanted to bring into the sun.

As a private pressure group it could, and has, infected whole nations. The old Arab world rotted away from it. The civilization of Greece and Rome marched their really great ideas, philosophies and arts into being, but both were bisexual to a point where the family unit broke down, and the virility of its great and best breeding lines decayed under attacks from more virile and child-breeding savage tribal orders.

I was no daring pioneer in writing of this problem. But I do think no autobiography has yet carried details of its impact on contemporary life as simply and directly as I intend to do in this, my life story.

THE DRAG treated seriously the problems of a homosexual, and showed how his abnormal tendencies brought disaster to his family, his friends, and himself. It stated that an intelligent under-

standing of the problems of all homosexuals by society could avert such social tragedies.

The word "drag," as used by homosexuals, means a big party or a ball, where they dress up as women for a kind of social romp. My play had a big scene that showed forty men, dressed as women, expressing themselves effeminately in song, dancing and dialogue. It was the oddest party ever produced on an American stage during a serious drama. I used comedy to make it exciting and interesting. Basically, the homosexual theme was given a clinical and serious treatment.

The play, directed by Edward Elsner, opened in Paterson, New Jersey. It created such excitement that the theatre was packed at every performance. Many of the audience came from New York, Boston, Philadelphia and other cities to see this play. They called long distance for reservations, and were paying as high as \$50 for seats when they couldn't get reservations. It took an hour to empty the theatre after the final curtain. People just would not leave after the show was over, but would visit the actors.

When I was ready to take the show to Broadway, some New York officials came to Jim Timony and asked us not to bring the show into New York because it would "upset the city."

I gave in reluctantly and didn't bring the show into New York City. Too many odd important people in town were frightened at the idea of my play as a public exhibit. I had gotten back all my money for the production, and made about thirty thousand dollars from the two weeks the play ran in Paterson, New Jersey. I intend some day to put *THE DRAG* into novel form, and even hope to produce it again as a play and then a picture.

I had done what I had set out to do: write a realistic play on a modern social problem. I had not been permitted to bring it to Broadway, and I had presented no solution. For two weeks—one could see, and make up one's own mind.

I wondered if I should try radio when my play closed. I was

never one to sneer at other mediums of entertainment and I had kept my eye on radio and motion pictures, knowing I'd be given a chance on them at some future turn of events. Radio has come up like a baby turning into a monster since its beginnings when it just announced ball scores and East Pittsburgh went on the air with its pioneering station KDKA.

Dempsey knocked out Carpentier for a radio public that still had crystal sets and earphones. In the middle thirties there were 563 radio stations on the air, and the public had spent that year forty-four million dollars for sets to hear, among other treats, Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, starring Blanche Yurka; and still there were 20,000,000 golfers on nearly six thousand country club links.

Soon Paul Whiteman was getting \$5,000 a radio show. Ben Bernie was replacing the first stars of the medium, The Happiness Boys, Billy Jones and Ernie Hare; and Amos and Andy emptied the movie theatres until after seven-thirty. I knew there was a place for me in radio if I waited for the right spot. I couldn't do what Will Rogers did on radio—burlesque President Calvin Coolidge so perfectly it fooled millions, even if Calvin was reported being “not amused.”

When my time did come on radio I almost blew up the medium, but just then I was having trouble on the stage that took all my time, and landed me in jail.

As I saw the theatre, it didn't present answers, only questions—some of them in my case only whispered of before I beat my bells on the stage.

New York City was an unhealthy theatre that year. A place of very little courage or originality, it now fell before a windy attack of publicity-seeking blue-noses. *SEX* was in its forty-first week at Daly's when it was the victim of a puritan campaign instigated by John Sumner, the pompous Pope of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. My play had apparently wrecked no one's morals all those weeks, but suddenly it must have affected Mr. Sumner's.

The real trouble was that its success had stimulated a rash of

plays with sex themes. Other authors and producers wanted to get in on the act, and they did. Most of their plays were repulsive; some filthy. Those few foul ones were the cause of the general clean-up.

While the playboy of fifty, Mayor James J. Walker, was on a vacation in Florida—perhaps conveniently, for he loved show business—the Acting Mayor Joseph V. “Holy Joe” McKee cracked down on the sex plays, acting on the complaints and reports of John Sumner and his assistant guardians of public morals.

There was a list of plays allegedly objectionable, even such a fine one as *God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch. Plays immediately affected by police action were *The Captive*, with Basil Rathbone and Helen Menken, *The Virgin Man*, and *SEX*. *The Captive* voluntarily withdrew from the stage. Rather than close, I chose to stand trial with my play.

I enjoyed the courtroom as just another stage—but not so amusing as Broadway. At the trial of *SEX*, the Assistant D.A., who was prosecuting me, could not find one line or one word in the play that was profane, lewd, lascivious or obscene. So he shifted gears and contended that “Miss West’s personality, looks, walk, mannerisms and gestures made the lines and situations suggestive.”

This contention was too hard to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt. In desperation, he pounced on an item of business in the second act “where, to a sailors’ jazz band playing ‘St. Louis Blues,’ Miss West did a *danse du ventre*,” frankly described as a belly dance (a dance now seen often enough, performed by loudly applauded native dancers from India and elsewhere).

“Can I do it in court?” I asked my lawyer.

He looked at the jury. “I doubt it.”

Jim said, “Let ‘em pay if they want to see it.”

What I did on stage was nothing more than an exercise involving control of my abdominal muscles, which I had learned from my father when I was a child, along with other body-building exercises. Father may have had odd ideas on body building—

but he never suspected his lessons would be called obscene. I performed the dance fully clothed, wearing a tight metallic evening gown. Of course I did it with feeling—I really enjoyed it.

The prosecutor questioned one of the arresting officers in detail about this dance. The officer blushed and testified. "Miss West moved her navel up and down and from right to left."

"Did you actually see her navel?" my lawyer asked him.

"No, but I saw something in her middle that moved from east to west."

The courtroom roared.

Yet it was on this moron stutter alone that a conviction was secured.

Tammany Hall ran the town with its hands in the public pockets, and orders had come from certain pious heads to close several shows. New York City was at the time one of the most politically dirty cities in the world, as the Seabury Investigation was to show a few years later.

(Four years later when I played *SEX* on the road in Chicago, Detroit and other key cities, I had no trouble with anybody about the play.)

My manager, my producer and I were sentenced to jail for "corrupting the morals of youth," and fined \$500. I decided I could use those ten days as a well-earned vacation. In fact, when I was riding to the prison on Welfare Island I was thinking of the idea for my next play. And I did write some articles, one for *Liberty Magazine*, for which I received a thousand dollars.

I objected to the underwear they gave me at the Island. It was rough on the body. "I want to wear my silk underwear."

"This ain't Saks Fifth Avenue," said a toothless old hag.

The Warden, a distinguished looking gentleman with a fine military carriage and a resonant voice, blushed. "Well, all right. Wear your own underwear."

Welfare Island had landscaped grounds, and everything was freshly painted, clean and sanitary. What the conditions were in

the men's building, I don't know, but I have no reason to assume they were not as good as in the women's quarters. The food was quite good. The prisoners got plenty of fresh air, situated as the island was in the East River.

I couldn't say the same about the Tombs prison, where I spent several hours before I was transported to Welfare Island. The Tombs was no rose. It was dirty and dismal. Everything that could not be painted gray was painted brown, and then permitted to damply peel. The confused, diseased, feeble-minded women were herded like animals, and though few ladies ever got there, the inmates were human beings, except for the prison rats and roaches. The very young and perhaps foolish, but certainly some innocent, were mixed with foul and decaying old biddies who knew every vice, and had invented a few of their own.

Humanity had parked its ideals outside, and the place was run by rewarded Civil Service ward heelers, relatives, and small-time vote peddlers who were all busy feeding and stealing at the public's expense. They looked, in many cases, worse than the prisoners; their faces showed greed, stupidity and lust. It was very much everyone grabbing what he could for himself. The food was revolting and tasted as if it came from the garbage scows that the city sent to sea. Nothing fitted, nothing was new, and everything smelled of jail, bodies, bugs and the powerful odor of some disinfectant that did little but spoil the air. Fresh air—like hope—was kept out.

On Welfare Island I got into the cotton dress they gave me. I had a room for myself, and a view of river and bridges from large windows. There was a door, but it was not a cell with iron bars.

"You're a special guest, Miss West. The word has come down we give you our best."

"Thanks."

The second day I was there, the warden told me, "All the women want to see you."

"I'm not here to be on exhibition." I was about to add, "I don't want to see them," when pity at their drab lives changed my mind. I said, "All right."

We went down long halls to another part of the prison. When I went into a large dormitory, all the women began applauding. "Glad to see you!" "Hello, Mae!" I didn't care for the use of my first name, but I figured if I could make them a less miserable mob I was doing some good.

Looking at the raddled, torn and toothless faces, I shivered. It could happen to anyone.

After a few days, the warden said to me, "I'm Mae West's secretary around here. Phone calls and mail seem all for you." He asked if I'd do an article for *Liberty Magazine*.

"I'll write it if you'll give me someone to type it. I've never learned to use a typewriter and I have no desire to learn typing in here."

"I'll see you get it typed up."

I left Welfare Island after eight days, having got two days off my ten for "good behavior." I talked to many of the girls and heard their pitiful stories. I tried to help some of them. But there were just too many sad cases.

Out of jail I looked around and thought of Hollywood and films. The motion picture industry had come out of its rented stores and was building film palaces, and vaudeville was in great danger. "Vaudeville will go," said *Variety*.

I read the reports of studio earnings and saw that vaudeville couldn't outgrow this new giant. In 1925 Paramount reported earnings of \$21,000,000; Metro, \$16,000,000; and First National, \$11,000,000. Nice solid round figures that I liked. I gave some real thought to motion pictures and as to how they could use my style and personality.

But as yet I had no answer. The block-buster was *The Big Parade* with John Gilbert, and I didn't see myself in the trenches. Universal lost \$2,500,000 on a version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Cecil B. DeMille opened *The King of Kings* with a two dollar top, and I noticed there were 18,000 film theatres in the United States, and 47,000 in the world.

And vaudeville houses were closing. Hollywood had had a few bad moments when Fatty Arbuckle, one of the big box-office comedy stars, had to face a jury over the erotic death of a party girl. In the smell of burning opium pipes, William Desmond Taylor, a famous director, was found dead, and two stars, Mable Normand and Mary Miles Minter were involved; the case was never 'officially' solved. Clara Bow was billed as "The Hottest Jazz Baby in Films" and everybody began to say, "Hot dog," "That's the cat's meow," and, "The cat's pajamas." Not my type of dialogue.

The big stars were Gloria Swanson, Tom Mix, Marion Davies. I felt if films could only progress a little more to my style of entertainment I would go out to the coast; but the music and the sound of my voice would be missing.

By 1926, 97 per cent of the theatres were movie palaces; only twelve real vaudeville houses remained open. Two-a-day became "continuous performances." The Palace barred drum rolls and spotlights, and vaudeville acts now supported pictures. In a year or so the Palace put in films. Of the big stars only George M. Cohan and Al Jolson never played the Palace.

I decided to write another play. I had thought out my new play in prison: *THE WICKED AGE*. The idea had come to me the day I took the dismal ride to Welfare Island. When I got down to the actual writing of it, it was fairly easy. The play was to be an exposé of the bathing beauty contests of the 1920's—the Miss Americas, crooked contests and fixed winners. While I had little trouble writing *THE WICKED AGE*, and no difficulty financing its production, the show proved to be a hit and a headache.

The actor we signed for the leading male part had been in silent motion pictures, but didn't have much stage experience. When we opened out of town to break in the show, this actor did not project beyond the footlights. His personality, his delivery, his voice, did

not get even to the first rows. He had a good enough speaking voice and charming personality in a room. But on stage, somehow, it just lay there.

Jim said, "Maybe it is just due to nervousness. We'll wait for a few performances to see what happens."

He did not do any better. I said, "Only a fire under him will help." Today with a microphone he could have been heard. But we didn't use microphones in the theatre at that time. The audience couldn't hear him and they started getting restless. In a legitimate show, once you lose an audience for a moment, the scene goes out the window and you can't get an audience back unless you blow up a few actors or fall into the orchestra pit.

Unfortunately this actor had the big male part, with many scenes; as a consequence, due to his lack of projection, each of his scenes went nowhere; certainly not to the audience, where they belonged, and where they were eagerly awaited out front. It was pathetic.

He had looked so good at rehearsals that we had given him a run-of-the-play contract. I said, "We have the right play and the wrong actor with a run-of-the-play contract. Oh, great!"

Jim suggested, "Maybe the mob could run him out of town for us."

I said, "I hope you're joking, Jim."

"No, I'm not."

I tried my best to keep the actor in the part. "By the time we get to New York, he might be able to get over to the audience."

But the managers of the theatre and of the show, with other people out front, were sure this Hollywood stick would not do. He also affected my performance. I had to repeat some of his lost lines so I would be sure the audience knew what he had said, and so that I would get my reaction on my own line that followed his.

It was a strain on my performance and on the other actors who had scenes with him. In desperation, I switched scenes and gave

many of his to another actor in the show whom the audience liked very much.

"This," he said, "takes the importance away from me, the leading man."

"Yes," I admitted. "But this at least doesn't spoil the show too much. It's impossible to open in New York and take a chance with you playing the scenes your way."

"Nobody at Metro ever talked to me that way."

Jim said, "They don't talk in Hollywood. They point."

"I shall take action."

"Be better if you took a train back to California."

"I have my contract."

I stopped Jim before he told him *where* to bank it.

We had a big advance sale in New York, and the Hollywood actor complained to Actors' Equity that I had taken his part and given most of it to another actor because "Miss West is having an affair with him and she is trying to make this favored actor the leading man for that reason."

This was mean, and, I am sorry to say, not true. Some of the actors in the show backed him; they were bit actors who were jealous of the man I gave the lines to. "Actors," John Barrymore once told me, "are people, but not human."

Actors' Equity stepped in opening day at Daly's in New York, and we had to give a performance for a committee from the actors' organization. We played the show for them both ways. With the complaining actor playing his original part, and then again the way it had been changed.

We went through an entire rehearsal of the show for the four members of the Equity committee. They sat in the front row and, being actors, were in sympathy with the Hollywood actor. Of course, sitting that close and in an empty house, they could hear him. In a packed house, which absorbs sound, they'd have realized that his voice didn't carry. They ruled, "You will have to play

the show in the original form, or this actor does not have to go on at all and you will have to pay him his salary for the run of the play."

And curtain time on opening night four hours away!

I could open with a bad actor—there was no understudy for his part—or close the show and pay all the actors two weeks' salary. We decided to go on with the sunkissed ham.

I was upset by these maddening conditions. It was hard for me to put the show back in the original version, as I had rewritten the scenes and learned them the new way.

"And now I am expected to go back and study the part the original way! And I have to be in a pretty good mood to make people laugh. This is a comedy show."

Jim said, "Steady, Mae—two hours to opening."

I was furious. I tried to offer a proposition to the actor. "Play it my way for just a week, until we get another actor in the part, and we'll pay you your salary for the run of the play."

He refused. We had to go through with it his way and he was no better in the part. However, the audience didn't pay much attention to him; they were much more interested in the play, and the laughs I was getting.

The show was going to be a hit, I knew. The critics' notices were great. One reviewer stated that there were "enough laughs in the play for three shows." But I had lost interest in the show. I was so irritated from fighting a bad actor that the fun was out of the show for me.

I said, "I don't care what kind of a hit it is. I'm going to close it in two weeks. I am too tightly strung to go through with it, even if it is a screaming success. It's a strain on me to try to be funny."

I ordered the show closed in two weeks.

"But, Mae—"

"Don't anyone say, 'The show must go on.' This one doesn't."

I was very emotional in those years. If it had happened in later years, I would have engaged any other actor and let the unsatis-

factory actor go, paying him the big salary he was getting and laughing it off. The truth was I had been living on my energy too long without a rest. I had depleted my nerve reserve and now it was catching up with me. Writing three plays in a row, producing them, and having to play in two of them, was suddenly too much. The inspiration was gone. I closed a comedy hit at the end of two weeks and ordered all the money from the advance sale returned to the public.

I wanted time to just think: Where was Mae West going—and just what did she want next? I got no answers—not satisfactory answers; not then. I became even more jumpy. It was Jim, in love with me, who said, “Mae, this is no good.”

“What can I do?”

“It may sound funny, but I say, write another play.”

I certainly didn’t want vaudeville again. It was nearly gone.

I felt I had gone on the legitimate stage at the right time. It was a strong theatre just then on Broadway, with such shows as *Kiki*, with Lenore Ulric, *Ladies of the Evening*, Jeanne Eagels in *Rain*. I tried to think of an amusing idea for a play.

The Creation of Diamond Lil



I HAD NOTICED that at my plays there were more men in the audiences than women. *SEX* had an audience 80 per cent men and 20 per cent women. At *THE WICKED AGE* I gained a bit: 70 per cent men, 30 per cent women in the audience. It disturbed me as to what I was doing, or wasn't doing, that kept women away. I played to parties of men, often twenty in a group. The only time I had women in any number was at matinees. They generally had to take balcony seats; the orchestra was always sold out in advance—to men.

In my new play, I would give a little thought to bringing in the women. I got to thinking I should do a period play of the Gay Nineties. I thought melodrama and nostalgia would please everyone. If I wrote a good play of the period and gave it modern pace, it would appeal to three generations: grandparents, the middle-aged, and the younger generation. Sex was perennial and would do no harm to the play.

I had always admired the fabulous fashions just before the turn of the century, when Lillian Russell and Lillie Langtry were around. I had seen many photographs in the styles of the period

and I thought them beautiful and alluring. It was style that really attracted me to the colorful background of the Nineties, and caused me to think of the idea that finally became *Diamond Lil*.

One night at my hotel, I stopped at the desk for mail, and the night manager said pleasantly, "Miss West, your diamonds are the hotel's best advertising. They're really beautiful."

I was wearing my small dinner set—a diamond brooch with a diamond chain, and a set of two and two-and-a-half inch diamond and platinum bracelets with a few emeralds set into them; a fine diamond wristwatch and a pure white perfect ten-carat diamond ring. I hadn't started out to collect diamonds, but somehow they piled up on me and in self-protection I became a gem expert.

I had received most of them as gifts from admirers and grateful male friends. I never asked for things, but felt it impolite to refuse a well-meant gift. One bracelet had been given to me by my friend and manager, Jim Timony. Another bracelet was from a judge, and the brooch I had accepted from a Wall Street admirer, who was in stocks and bonds and given to expressing himself in style.

The night manager of the hotel admired my diamonds again and said, "My, my, they are something to look at."

"I guess that's why I wear them."

"What are you going to do next on the stage, Miss West?"

"I am thinking about doing a period play of the turn of the century."

He started telling me his recollections of the Bowery in those years. "I was a police captain down in that precinct when I was a young fellow. It's still wild and crazy and full of misfits and monsters."

"You must have been some guy."

"You wouldn't think it now."

"I would. You look as if you have nothing to regret," I said.

He began telling me about the Raines Law Hotels, which were saloons whose owners attached bedrooms to their taverns in order

to be able to sell liquor on Sundays. According to the Raines Law, only a licensed hotel, having at least ten bedrooms, could do so. The Raines Law Hotels were really disorderly houses.

"You remind me of a sweetheart I had then, down on the Bowery. She had a lot of diamonds, just like you. And how the men did run after her!"

Suddenly I visualized the character who was to become a part of American folklore—Diamond Lil. But the name came later, when I remembered how my father playfully called my mother "Champagne Til," because she didn't like hard liquor, but would sip champagne on occasion. This gave me the idea of a nickname for a title. I was going to call my play "Diamond Til," but I finally decided on "Diamond Lil."

I went to my suite and thought about the desk clerk's talk and the old Bowery. It would be the best setting for my next play. I started at once getting the play down on paper.

A few items got into the newspapers (carefully planted) that I was going to do a play about the New York Bowery during the Nineties.

Jim got a call from a Jack Linder. "I would like to produce a play with Mae West."

Jim said, "You're an ambitious fellow. What else have you got?"

"Let me come over and talk about it."

At the first meeting with Jim, he said: "You have Miss West's play about the Bowery. My brother, Mark Linder, has written a play about Chatham Square down there. What I really want is to produce my brother's play, and have Miss West star in it."

Jim made the appointment for Mark Linder to read his play to me. The Linders were bright Broadway characters, and I saw no harm in hearing their play. It sounded like an old play that had been lying around for quite some time. It was tired in construction, banal in plotting, characterless.

"The play has nothing in it I like for myself," I said.

"It's nice to feel ambitious," I said.

Jim added, "Miss West is finishing her own play. But it isn't quite ready for production."

Jack Linder said, "Maybe I can produce Miss West's show. I'd like to read it when it's ready. I've got plenty of backers' money and I want to become a legitimate producer on Broadway."

Jim talked it over with me later. I said I wasn't too anxious to do business with them. "This man's only been connected with small-time projects. I don't think he would think along the lines we do."

Jim saw more in the Linders than I did. When I had my play ready, Jim said, "Linder's so anxious to become a big man I think he'll spend plenty of money on this production. And after all, his money is as good as anyone else's."

An appointment was made for me to read my play to them. "We're crazy about it," Jack said. "And there's a part in it for Mark here."

Mark was an actor, besides being a playwright, and I saw nothing wrong in his playing in the show.

I was wary of the Linders, but they had the backers for putting on *DIAMOND LIL*.

When we were ready to sign contracts, Jack Linder said, "We are going to do your play, not Mark's play. Maybe he could get some credit for suggesting the locale."

Mark was grateful for the program billing: "Locale suggested by Mark Linder."

I gave Mark Linder a part in the play. My original intuition proved correct, for these Linder brothers gave me a lot of headaches over this show. Years later I had to have a court prove to them once and for all how lucky they had been, and were entitled to no more and no less than I have stated here.

My sister Beverly was in the show, playing Sally, a young girl in the big city, whom Lil befriends.

We got a good director, Ira Hards, to stage the play, and we

opened at Teller's Shubert in Brooklyn, during Holy Week, 1928, with a top-notch production, scenery, and costumes.

I spent a small fortune on my gowns for it; they were made by hand by skilled dressmakers who still remembered the styles of the period and could create the proper boning and fitting of the wasp-waisted, long-trained, heavy material dresses so that they would be authentic as well as handsome. I familiarized myself with every detail of the production so closely that once as I was lying in my golden swan bed waiting for the second act curtain to rise, I could tell that the lights in the strip above me had been mysteriously switched. By the last dress rehearsal everyone and everything in the entire production was letter perfect.

Holy Week is traditionally the worst week in show business. Jim thought not many people would be in the theatre the last week of Lent, so it didn't matter where the show opened. "And opening in Brooklyn will save railroad fares for as big a company of actors as *DIAMOND LIL*.

I was sure of the play and sure of myself. The only thing I wasn't sure of was would the younger generation like period costumes. We had all worked hard; the rehearsals had been long and involved. I was aware I had a fine play, and I tried to perfect it in every way.

We opened to a packed house to everyone's surprise, and that week broke the all-time box-office record of the theatre. The notices were colorful. On April 5, 1928, Robert Garland, the columnist and drama critic of the New York *Evening Telegram*, wrote:

When the justly celebrated Miss Mae West pulls a swift one . . . she opens a new play where Brooklyn's Monroe Street, Howard Avenue and Broadway come together, and you can't see the theatre's front door for the crowds that mill before it.

And mill they did last night between eight and eight-thirty. You'd have thought that a favorite bootlegger had come back

from Atlanta or that some civic event of equal importance was about to happen. . . .

The most casual investigation disclosed the fact that it was Miss West who was responsible for much of the turmoil. Miss West, author of that sterling home-and-fireside drama *SEX*, was staging her latest dialogic brain-child in Teller's Shubert Theatre, and half Manhattan was of a mind to get there.

Until yesterday I had not seen Miss West. That, of course, was my misfortune. But from now on, she's my favorite actress. From now on, I'm willing—anxious, even—to pay money to enjoy her. From now on, I intend to applaud her from the top lines of my column and the front rows of theatres in which she happens, by the grace of God and the laxity of the Police Department, to be playing.

She is, as a chap in a maroon sweater shouted, "an actress and no fooling." So regal is Miss West's manner, so assured is her artistry, so devastating are her charms in the eyes of all red-blooded men, so blond, so beautiful and so buxom is she that she makes Miss Ethel Barrymore look like the late lamented Mr. Bert Savoy.

I'm here to tell you that *DIAMOND LIL* is a swell play . . . a grand "Bowery folk play." As for Miss West herself, in person, and a very moving picture, she's simply superb. It's worth swimming to Brooklyn to see her descend those dance hall stairs, to be present while she lolls in a golden bed reading the *Police Gazette*, murders her girl friend, wrecks the Salvation Army, and sings as much of "Frankie and Johnnie" as the mean old law allows.

After the Brooklyn tryout, I didn't have to change a line or an actor. I had learned by now that I could say almost anything, do almost anything on a stage if I smiled and was properly ironic in delivering my dialogue.

We crossed the bridge to Manhattan and opened at the Royale Theatre. When the curtain rang down David Belasco, the old showman, came backstage and took me in his arms. He said, "I couldn't have done better myself. It was excellent."

The entire audience stood up and cheered the final curtain, and many of the New York critics came back to congratulate me on

my success. I remember Walter Winchell, Percy Hammond and Heywood Broun. I was *Diamond Lil* off-stage as well as on. The champagne flowed and I knew the play was a hit. It got some odd comments. The New York *Daily Mirror* wrote:

Carl Van Vechten went to see *Diamond Lil* the other night at the Royale for the third or fourth time, bringing with him John Colton. After the second act, Mr. Colton sent a note back to Miss West.

"I've seen them all," he wrote, "from Bernhardt to Sada Yaceo (missed Rachel owing to delayed birth), but you surpass."

I was enormously pleased—who wouldn't be? "But who," I inquired, "who is this Sada Yaceo?" Various erudite persons and horse players failed to solve the problem for me.

Percy Hammond, drama critic of the New York *Herald Tribune* put it this way: "The Rewards of Virtue. . . . Miss Mae West has become an institution in the Broadway drama. . . . The Theatre Royale is crowded at each performance of *DIAMOND LIL*. . . . Mae West, its star and author, is now more admired by her public than is Jane Cowl, Lynn Fontanne, Helen Hayes or Eva LeGallienne."

"Mae is to the New York stage," wrote Leonard Hall in the New York *Evening Telegram*, "what a match is to a scuttle of gunpowder—what a hot fire is to a shivering wienerwurst. Just when the theatres wink out and the first nighters begin to deal timetables from the bottom of the deck, in flames Mae West in a sizzling drammer that sets Times Square to roaring.

"She is the prize tang-inserter of the American theatre. Probably no other stage in the world could produce such a phenomenon as this opulent girl whose acted works prove just because a lady is a little vulgar it is no sign that her heart isn't 22-carat gold."

The more serious Stark Young, reviewing in *The New Republic*, said, "Glamor Miss West undoubtedly has. . . . She is alive

on the stage as nobody is in life; she astonishes—shocks if you like—engages and puzzles you. In *DIAMOND LIL* all roads lead indeed to Rome. This Rome of all roads is Miss West. . . . You may watch her performance and take it any way you like; the theatre, you perceive, is a place for your pleasure. . . . Miss West is a part of the secret of Pan before the footlights."

The puzzle of who was Sada was solved a few days later, in a note to the drama editor of the *Mirror*.

Dear Sir:

If John Colton meant Sada Yacco, the greatest Japanese tragedienne of her time, why didn't he say so? No wonder it wasn't recognized under Yaceo.

John Colton was the dramatist who wrote the smash hit play *Rain*, based on Somerset Maugham's story "Miss Thompson." Also *The Shanghai Gesture*. He was an ironic cosmopolitan, mocking, witty and fun to have around.

Carl Van Vechten was a critically acclaimed avant-garde writer and novelist of the Twenties, who had written such best-sellers as *Peter Whiffle*, *Nigger Heaven* and *The Tattooed Countess*. I liked best his intriguing book about cats entitled *The Tiger in the House*. Carl, buck-toothed, blond, chi-chi and bored, was the hunter of sinister sensations to be found in odd parts of New York.

Richard Watts, then drama critic of the New York *Post*, was the first to hail *DIAMOND LIL* as a "modern classic." Other critics followed suit.

In a sense I suppose it is. Certainly it is, as Bernard Sobel wrote, "one of the few authentic stage pictures of tenderloin night life with its fashionable slumming parties, singing waiters, and 'Frankie and Johnny' balladists." It has warmth and humor, color, variety and suspense. It is, in a word, "theatre." Anyone who wants to know how to write "theatre" can "Come up and see me sometime."

FRANKIE AND JOHNNY

As sung by Mae West in the original Diamond Lil production

Frankie and Johnny were lovers—
Lord Gawd, how they could love!
Swore they'd be true to each other,
True as the stars up above.
He was her man,
And she loved him so.

Frankie went 'round the corner,
To get a bucket of beer;
Said to the man called Bartender,
"Have you seen my Johnny here?"
"He's my man,
"And I loves him so."

"I ain't gonna tell you no stories,
"And I ain't gonna tell you no lies;
"I saw your man Johnny leave about an hour ago
"With a bum named Nellie Bly.
"He's your man, and he's doin' you wrong."

Frankie went 'round to that hop joint,
Brought along a great big forty-four.
She went inside, and there she spied
Her Johnny on the floor.
He was her man, and he was doin' her wrong.

"Turn me over, Frankie,
"Turn me over slow.
"Turn me over on my right side, Frankie,
"Why did you shoot so low?
"I was your man, and I done you wrong."

Rubber tired coaches,
Rubber tired hacks,
Is gonna take my man to the graveyard,
Ain't never gonna bring him back,
'Cause he's my man,
And he done me wrong.
(Goddamn his soul!)

Bring on your million policemen,
Bring on your million jails;
Throw the key into the St. Louis River,
Nobody's gonna go my bail.
He was my man, and he done me wrong.

With *DIAMOND LIL* I had it made. Through the years people have come to think of my characterization of Lil as my other self. Sometime, somewhere, I recall, someone quoted me as saying: "Diamond Lil—I'm her and she's me and we're each other." I hope I was not so ungrammatical, but however I said it, I spoke at least a partial truth. Lil in her various incarnations—play, novel,* motion picture—and I have been one.

From here on, Lil and I, in my various characterizations, climbed the ladder of success wrong by wrong.

I enjoyed my success with no false humility, and no coy hiding of my ego under a basket. I had worked very hard since a teenager. I was still young enough to think it would always be like this, and show-wise, and aware that it would be hard to follow. And that the public and my admirers would demand more and better things. Success is a two-bladed golden sword; it knights one and stabs one at the same time.

One thing it did: I was meeting a new type man—but not too different from what I was accustomed to. Hard as I worked, I would be lying to say I neglected all of my emotional side. I'm a girl who likes balance in everything and I now wanted to catch up on my love life.

*In 1932 I turned the story into prose narrative form. It was published by The Macaulay Co., has sold over 95,000 copies, and is still in print.

Love on the Run



I FELT it was time to play. Most of my thoughts, time and energy had gone into creative effort. And this restriction of the love drive, the head shrinkers will tell you, is the greatest urge one really has. When one sublimates the sex drive into creative work it puts a person in high gear mentally. I admit it. But it is against my nature to bottle up the biological plans of pleasure for any length of time. I hope I don't sound as if I have discovered the secret salve that soothes the universe, but I do want to add my small footnote on the subject.

Jim Timony and I, of course, had been romantically interested in each other for a good while, and by now that interest had gone through a process of change. The first fine frenzy of our affair had cooled down to the level of a devoted friendship and business relationship. Business produced petty arguments with Jim which I never could take. These arguments usually centered around money.

I said, "Money is a splendid commodity, Jim, and everybody

should have lots of it. But money to burn does not necessarily produce the flames I need right now."

"Now, Mae, you've got to believe in bookkeeping."

"I'd rather believe in Santa Claus."

During these first years together, Jim and I were in a way an engaged couple. I was still married to Wallace (when I stopped to think of it). There were times when asked if I had ever married, I'd say "No" without thinking.

Jim was aware of the strength of my emotional desires for handsome men, so he made it his business to keep me busy on other projects. He was always near me, and if my eye wandered speculatively, he moved in between me and the object of my speculation.

With the long run of a hit play, there was for me the leisure to dwell on romantic urges. Jim sensed it. He introduced me to a producer, saying, "He wants you to write a play for him. Carl Reed."

"I don't want to work, I want to play."

But Reed was above average as a Broadway producer; a man of taste and breeding, college-educated and with a passion for the theatre. He had produced several artistic plays that had lost an enormous amount of money. He had faith in everything he produced, spent money lavishly on their production. But he was unfortunate in getting plays that weren't box-office hits.

He said to me, "Miss West, I would like you to write a play for me that would get some of my money back, and help make up my great losses."

"You interest me, Mr. Reed."

I liked Carl Reed, and I did have several ideas that I was considering. I outlined one of these to him and he said I must do it for him.

It looked as if my physical and emotional binge would have to be postponed again. *DIAMOND LIL* was in its third month at the Royale Theatre when I received a letter:

If you do not give me two thousand dollars, I will tell the press I wrote *DIAMOND LIL*.

Greta Willard

P.S. I will be at the stage entrance at 7 P.M. tonight.

I showed the letter to Jim. He said, "She must be a nut. But keep the letter anyway. I'll check the stage entrance."

She never showed up.

A few days later another letter arrived at the theatre containing the same threat, and this time demanded \$5,000. A day later a third extortion letter arrived.

"Don't worry," Jim said. "I said it's a nut. The Broadway woods are full of them."

Nothing happened for several weeks. Then I got a letter from Joseph P. Bickerton, attorney, and counsel for the Dramatists' Guild, asking me to see him. Jim arranged a meeting with Mr. Bickerton at the offices of the Guild, a gloomy place of fumed oak and dark hangings, a stage set rather than an office.

Mr. Bickerton, large and legal looking, informed me, "A woman named Greta Willard has complained to the Guild that she is the only, and original, author of *DIAMOND LIL*, in which you are starring. And says that she, Greta Willard, has never been paid any royalties."

"I received three threatening letters from a Greta Willard and they were plainly for extortion. Naturally I wrote the play, not Miss Willard. I've never met her."

Jim gave Mr. Bickerton the three letters. He read them, and after studying them a few moments, said, "Miss Willard is in the next room. May I have her come in?"

I nodded and a colorless woman of no guessable age came in—one of those gray personalities that one can't describe, they blend so perfectly into any background.

The lawyer questioned the Willard woman closely. He then

asked her, "Have you ever written to Miss West or Mr. Timony asking them for money?"

She said, "I have not."

"Why have you waited three months after the opening of the play before doing something about your claim?"

"I thought they would get in touch with me."

Mr. Bickerton showed her the three letters. "Are these signatures yours?"

"No. I flatly deny having written those letters and made those signatures."

Mr. Bickerton said, "You had better tell the truth, as Miss West could take you to court. You could be sent to jail for writing the letters."

She looked at the letters again. "Well, it does look like my handwriting. All I can say is I may have written them. I drink quite heavily at times, and sometimes I don't remember what I do in that alcoholic condition."

Mr. Bickerton put paper and pen before her. "I suggest you write a letter to Miss West apologizing for these letters and your accusations about Miss West regarding the authorship of the play."

The Willard woman slowly wrote the letter of apology. Some time later I saw a newspaper story with her photo; she had been convicted for forgery and blackmailing a senator in Washington. Her name wasn't Greta Willard; it was Hazel Drew. She had had previous arrests and convictions and was known to Brooklyn police as "The Tiger Woman." A press clipping was sent to me.

HAZEL DREW SENT TO CITY
PRISON FOR YEAR FOR LARCENY

Hazel Drew, 33, was saved from a term in the penitentiary today when County Judge George W. Martin sent her back to

Raymond Street jail where she has spent the last four months awaiting sentence on a bad check charge.

Judge Martin's sentence today was one year in the city prison. With good behavior and the credit she has for time already served, Brooklyn's "Tiger Woman," the name given her by the police, will be out in time for Thanksgiving dinner.

Meanwhile I was writing the play I had promised Carl Reed. He asked me, "How soon can you finish it?"

"I can have it ready in about four weeks."

It was a backstage story called *PLEASURE MAN*, for two sets. I gave Carl the story outline and he lost no time in getting his scenery designed and built, and the business end of the production in order.

I was playing in *DIAMOND LIL*, but I attended casting rehearsals when I didn't have a matinee performance; and it was at these early castings that I wrote the greater part of *PLEASURE MAN*. By doing it at early rehearsals I was able to create the characters around certain personalities cast for the show.

The show had a large cast. For one actor, Wally James, I wrote the character of "Mr. Fix-it," a small-time vaudeville comedian who was always ready to fix up everybody's act but his own.

My eye was roving as the new show rehearsed and as the journalists began to invent my life. An article, *The Sinful Stage*, appeared in *Vanity Fair*, by Percy Hammond, drama critic of the New York *Herald Tribune*.

Not many playwrights are more attended at present than Miss Mae West, composer of *DIAMOND LIL*, unless it be Bayard Veiller, composer of *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. Miss West for the moment is in the cheery altitudes of popularity, bedecked with the laurels indigenous to those who have made hits. Her creation of an everflowing, blonde, elegant and humorous Bowery prostitute is renowned and prosperous. Yet her ascent to the heights was not accomplished without desperate travail, the details of which are not set forth in the schoolrooms. I convey the dismal though

salubrious tidings that Miss West's struggle to the tottering top was, if not tooth and nail, at least hip and thigh. In her ambitious girlhood she was forced to wear tights in the Winter Garden.

Mr. Hammond was slightly off the beam when he assumed that I had fought a desperate struggle to get where I was. I cheerfully granted him the tights.

Mr. Percy Hammond went on:

I do not believe that Doctor Baker or Doctor Quinn could have made her pathway smoother by their sermons on the history and technique of show business. As she stands temporarily upon the summit, she can quote with Mr. Shipman, Eugene Walter and Noel Coward the verse of the weary Christina:

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the journey take the whole day long?

From morn to night, my friend."

I don't know about the struggles of the other playwrights mentioned, with the exception of Eugene O'Neill, in whose circles I never moved. He was a genius who fought a lifelong struggle against ill-health and tragic circumstances; perhaps our greatest American playwright whose life was a long day's journey into night. My night journeys were not his.

To return to *PLEASURE MAN*, I managed to have a short sensational friendship during the rehearsals of the play. Dinjo, or so I'll call him, was a Frenchman. I met him one night after a performance of *DIAMOND LIL*.

Dinjo had bedroom eyes, the body of a duelist and the charm of a French Ambassador. There were four other men in the party, including Jim. We went to a restaurant for a late supper. Dinjo sat opposite me; so very good looking with that athletic body. After my first glance, I knew something was going to happen. Every time I looked at him, he quickly dropped his eyes, and I knew he had been watching me as a cat watches a bowl

of cream. He didn't talk much, but he had a soft, deep voice and I decided his eyes were sensuous, very dark brown, and I wanted to muss his thick, wavy black hair. If all this has a banal sound, love is banality to all outsiders.

I felt like a schoolgirl let loose in a regiment of guardsmen. I knew better than to direct my conversation to him. Jim Timony was watching me closely. Jim was a most possessive and jealous man and, in public, I always showed the greatest consideration for his feelings. No man likes to sit by and see a handsome rival expose his failure to satisfy. Every time I was attracted to a man I never showed interest in him or asked those special courting questions in the presence of Jim. If I did, Jim would make sure I would never see the man again.

Dinjo never had much to say, but he didn't need to say anything. I felt an instant chemical reaction of passion, adventure and ardent desire as I got into his emotional range. He seemed to vibrate a readiness for love that suited me. The nearness of attractive men in my plays never missed having a psychological kick for me. It kept me in a constant sensual state of unrest.

With the pressure of my performances in *DIAMOND LIL*, and getting *PLEASURE MAN* ready, I had no time for the usual romantic preliminaries. Both Dinjo and I knew exactly what we wanted; the only difficulty was finding the opportunity.

I said, "You know?"

He said, "Oh, yes."

I said, "L'amour."

He said, "Love as you say."

I said, "As I say."

It became a kind of hit-and-run affair. Endurance had to be sacrificed to speed and my busy stage life. Finesse lost out to practical conditions. The results were like a high speed film—blurred but exciting.

Our affair had to be carried on impromptu, in various settings, on the spur of moments, as chance afforded. We met in dressing rooms, hallways, cars, backstage alone, dark, dusty, in an emptied theatre; even in a self-service elevator—for devious reasons.

Jim watched our apartments too closely to use them. Our opportunities had to be grasped between the time I'd conclude my evening performance of *DIAMOND LIL* at the Royale Theatre, and the time I was expected to attend rehearsals of *PLEASURE MAN* at the Biltmore Theatre only two blocks north on Forty-seventh Street. This allowed less than an hour to remove my Diamond Lil costume and makeup, get into street wear and get to the rehearsal. Love on the run with half the buttons undone, as in a Restoration comedy.

However, Dinjo and I managed, and our squeeze plays against time added excitement to a very hectic *menage*. We worked out our time-table like a general preparing a battle attack. We pinpointed minutes to capture sweet seconds for ourselves. Dinjo had his car ready and waiting outside the Royale Theatre after my evening's performance each night.

Jim had been softened and thrown off guard, I hoped, by my saying, "I don't like this Dinjo type too well. He never talks. I think him rather dull."

Jim would wait for me at the *PLEASURE MAN* rehearsals. I usually got to the Biltmore Theatre on time. A few times I was a shade late, but not often enough to arouse suspicions. I learned to dress faster than a fireman sliding a pole.

This went on for weeks. One night, full of visions of love and Dinjo's strong arms, after leaving the Royale Theatre, we daringly drove over to my hotel. I didn't get out of the car, just had a bell-boy come out and take a package from me to put in my suite. Dinjo then drove over to the Biltmore Theatre. As we pulled up in front of the theatre and parked in the adjoining alley which led to the stage entrance, a taxi pulled up to the curb and a woman

sprang out like an overwound toy and rushed over to the car shouting, "There you are! You! You!"

The street was dark; it was well after midnight. All the marquee lights of the theatres had been turned out.

I turned to Dinjo. "Tell me about *this*."

The woman, clawing at the car door, was in a great state of agitation. Tall, five-feet-eight, with drab blonde hair, a thin, bony face without any makeup. She shrieked again at Dinjo in a towering rage. Then she glared in at me, sitting calmly there beside him. I was wishing I had half a brick in my hand.

"So, Dinjo. So this is why you don't come home nights. Why I sit home alone with our child." She shouted at me, "You are the reason he beats me!"

"I never suggested it, Madam," I said.

". . . why he gets angry and does not want to be with me."

Dinjo said, "Mae, I'm sorry."

I said, "Really. A wife! This makes things different. A child, too? And beating her? This, I don't like."

"Mae, she's a shrew. Look at her."

The shrew screamed a lot of things I no longer care to remember. Dinjo got out of the car, grabbed her and dragged her to the taxi. He pushed her into it and slammed the door. As it drove off, he came back and got into the car.

"Mae, I don't like scenes."

"I'm not going to make one."

"You forgive me?"

"How can I forgive a wife and child deserter and mate beater?"

"Forget it."

"We'll see."

For about half an hour we rode around the dark town. We weren't being followed, and we returned to the theatre.

"Dinjo, why hadn't you told me you were married?"

"Seriously, we're rushing so I never had time to tell you."

I laughed. In the frantic schedule we had been keeping what he said was very nearly the truth.

"I feel sympathy for your wife. You realize that now our affair cannot go on."

"But why?"

Dinjo had his side of the story to tell. "My marriage has never been a love match. I was only twenty-six. My father died, leaving me a house on the upper West Side, and a good interest in the importing business. The girl who is now my wife, she hung on to me, keeping me from meeting other girls. Until finally she forced me to marry her. Then there was a child."

"I am sorry. It's such an ordinary story, Dinjo. And I'm sorry for both of you. But I have made it a rule never to break up a marriage for any reason."

But the affair had been so intense it could not be stopped dead suddenly like a train. It had to be tapered off like a powerful drug. I threw all my energies into my performances and into getting the play *PLEASURE MAN* ready for its approaching opening.

Gradually, Dinjo became a dim, lovely experience. He still came around, showed jealousy when he thought there was someone taking his place. And there were. There were men in *DIAMOND LIL* who would have liked to replace him.

But with Jim, my manager, close at hand, checking up on my movements, I didn't think it advisable to publicly entertain male members of the cast. I saw what this could lead to when Jim gave one of the publicity parties he was always throwing in a big hotel near the theatre.

I was a little breathless from the hunting of love nests with Dinjo, the shock of his wife's midnight appearance, and Jim's wariness. It was a perilous, ridiculous position—and dangerous. And I had nobody to blame but myself.

At this party, one of the actors in my show seated himself next to me at my table. Another, whom I'll call Ted, was there

also, looking at me with blue but wolfish eyes. The master of ceremonies was a big, good-looking man who had once appeared on a vaudeville bill with me, and had tried to make love to me in an uncomfortable hurry. He didn't appeal to me as he was too aggressive and drank, and he got nowhere. I could now see from the way he behaved that he still held out hope for himself. Jim was at the bar.

Dinjo came back from parking his car, his entire career. He saw the actor seated next to me, one hand caressing the back of my chair and talking to me with open-mouthed admiration, showing all his big white teeth. Dinjo didn't like what he saw. He told the actor, "Get up. You are in my seat."

Not knowing about Dinjo and me, the actor looked bewildered. "Wait a minute, guy." He hesitated in his uncertainty.

Dinjo, impatient, yanked him up out of the chair.

I said, "Go away, Dinjo."

"Who you telling to go away?"

Ted came over. He had his own private motivations and the actor was his buddy. He said, "Who is this outsider?"

"Who the devil are you?"

The two started exchanging punches. The actor joined in, and the M.C. came over and looked on. "I hope they all kill each other."

Ted, who had been a teenage street fighter, broke a water glass and went on to give Dinjo a taste of his own blood. The waiters felt this was getting a little too rugged for a fine hotel. Other impartial parties crowded in and put a stop to the brawl. To me it wasn't real, but like a surrealist dream.

Jim took me home later and he said: "Men can get funny over a woman. Funny peculiar, that is."

It was in a welter of over-emotional complications that we got *PLEASURE MAN* ready in time. The men in my life walked

around stiff legged, watching each other like animals at a water-hole, ready to leap at each others' throats.

The play opened for a break-in at Bridgeport, Connecticut. It was a success at the box-office. Word of mouth and the wire services carried reports to New York. Jack Conway, in *Variety*, reviewed the show in coy prose, in its second week of tryouts in The Bronx, New York, on September 17, 1928. (*PLEASURE MAN*, a backstage story of vaudeville life, dramatized the career of handsome headliner Rodney Terrill, whose careless affairs with women led to unexpected but well-deserved difficulties.)

OH, MY DEAR, HERE'S MAE WEST'S NEW SHOW
—GET A LOAD OF IT.

. . . Mae West's new show, *PLEASURE MAN*, opened its season at the Bronx Opera House, Monday. Though a tryout, and in the Bronx, through Mae West's well-known rep as a playwright, it was thought better to catch it while the catching was there, so here it is.

Oh, my dear, you must throw on a shawl and run over to the Biltmore in two weeks to see Mae West's *PLEASURE MAN*. Monday night at the Bronx Opera house it opened cold and was adorable.

It's the queerest show you've ever seen. All of the Queens are in it. You haven't seen anything like it since the gendarmes put the "curse of the seven witches" on *THE DRAG*.

Must give you a vein full of that last act. One of the Queens who used to be in show business throws a party for all the performers on the bill. The female impersonators four strong, and some other Queens, all go in drag. Are you screaming?

They all do specialties and make whoopee until the tragedy occurs. And, dearie, it's some tragedy.

The heavy, a conceited ham who tries to make every dame he meets, is at the party with the wife of a dancer on the bill. He has been making a heavy play for her, and my dear, she's teetering. He tells her to return, and join him in a certain room. She does and finds out he's been sneezed. Her husband is suspected, for he broke up the party in a jealous rage and was given the air. But when the police get through questioning everybody, including two

of the Queens, the brother of a girl the heavy has ruined, confesses he did it.

But that's not the half of it, dearie. It seems he was a medical student and he explained he didn't intend to kill him, just wanted to fix it so he wouldn't do any more stepping, and performed an operation. Can you imagine!

The whole thing is backstage stuff and surefire. Things happen fast and furious . . . it has plenty of plot and drama as well as comedy.

The thing ran two hours and a half . . . and the audience loved every minute of it! Will it get the pennies? You and I should have a piece.

That West girl knows her box-office, and this one is in right now. It can't miss, and if you think it can, hope you get henna in your tooth brush.

But don't miss it. . . . And go early, for some of the lines can't last.

Variety style of writing, like *Time* style, is a puzzle sometimes.

We opened October 1, 1928, in New York City at the Biltmore Theatre. There was an advance ticket sale of two hundred thousand dollars, which was enormous in those days when the American dollar was worth a lot more.

America was at the peak of the Great Bull Market of the late 1920's, and the theatre prospered. We were sold out solid for weeks in advance. It looked as if the art house producer, Carl Reed, was soon to recoup most of his heroic losses in show business. The first night drew well-dressed crowds to the theatre who showed disappointment when there were no seats available.

And then the play was dealt a blow below the belt. The excitement that the play had created in its tryout weeks had saturated Broadway and theatre-goers with great expectations of seeing a sensational piece of entertainment. My name was up in lights on the Biltmore's marquee as the author, and only two blocks away I was still appearing in *DIAMOND LIL*.

The play was a serious effort on my part and was entirely

different from my previous play, *THE DRAG*. It did not deal with homosexuality for its basic theme. It dealt with normal people, and was a story of backstage life; the female impersonators appeared because they are an integral part of show business, and always have been, even before Shakespeare's time. The theatre has attracted them by its color, its interesting life, and its values beyond accepted society.

On opening night before the second scene of the third act, the police came onstage in droves and carrying nightsticks, and arrested the entire show. As the author, I was again the Number One target, and it was a newspaper holiday. Through our legal counsel, while headlines shouted: "MAE WEST IN PADDY WAGON AGAIN. BAD GIRL OF BROADWAY IN TROUBLE AGAIN," we obtained a court injunction against further police interference. I reopened the show for its second Broadway performance. It drew even greater crowds. The next day, before the Wednesday matinee was over, the D.A.'s office got a Tammany-appointed judge to vacate the injunction. The police were back again for a repeat performance of their own, and the show closed for good. The headlines grew wilder, and there were more pictures of me—almost life-sized—in the press.

I went to trial with Nathan Burkan, one of the ablest lawyers in New York, defending me and my show. This time I won the case on the grounds the show was "not basically an immoral performance." I was vindicated. I could open *PLEASURE MAN* on Broadway tomorrow, if I so desired. After Tennessee Williams' sexual hullabaloo the audiences are now free to face the lower half of man's aspirations on earth without arrest.

After the trial, however, the edge was off the show. We had refunded all the advance sale money, and when the trial was all over, I said, "It would be like putting on a revival to open again." Revivals are only fresh and stimulating after a great play has lain dormant for a long time.

Carl Reed had a fortune due him in this show, *PLEASURE MAN*, and it was yanked away from him. Myself, I still had a long season to go in *DIAMOND LIL*. We were planning a long road tour when the New York run should end, and that, Jim said, "was nowheres in sight."

The Shuberts had just finished spending \$200,000 doing over the Apollo Theatre in Chicago into ornate *moderne*. They wanted to open the new Apollo with a big Broadway hit. Chicago never produced a hit show of its own, and the best had to be imported from Broadway. Jim said, "They produce pork, but not plays." *DIAMOND LIL* was the choice favorite for the spot. In January, 1929, we rang down the curtain on Lil's Broadway run and went west to ring it up again in Chicago's Loop.

Opening on January 20, *DIAMOND LIL* was, as a local ticket seller said, "The biggest sensation since the Chicago conflagration." A fabulous opening, with not only the Gold Coast elite glittering in, but from Cicero and other notorious environs came the Big Bad Boys of the bootleg era, their mink-wrapped molls well stacked, carrying their lord's hardware for them under furs.

The reviewers were generous.

Frederick W. McQuigg in the Chicago *Evening American*, wrote,

Here's a warning. If you think you are going over to Clark and Randolph to see the latest of theatres, you will fool yourself. This *DIAMOND LIL* show and this Mae West are such vibrant, clever and smart performance that you have no time to absorb the beauties of the theatre. Here's entertainment that takes you slumming and keeps you slumming until the final curtain. Miss West is gorgeous as the diamond-bedecked wanton without a soul.

Then Ashton Stevens, dean of Chicago's drama critics, in the *Herald and Examiner*:

Never have I seen a woman kiss on the stage as Mae West kissed on the Apollo stage Sunday night. Never have I seen an actress pawed from hip to buttock as Miss West's avid leading man pawed her in that bedroom set with the golden swan bed.

When the rain began to fall on the bedroom window, I reached for my hat, for Diamond Lil certainly did not play cards. And then my own laughter saved me. . . . I saw that the embraces in *DIAMOND LIL* are much the same funny, fiendish exaggerations that the obscenities are in *The Front Page*. They belong not so much to Sex as to Humor.

I saw Chicago as sinister and fascinating. The underworld came with society to my dressing room; the derby and top hat met, the hoodlums and the millionaires both tried their best manners on me. Lawlessness and society had a common meeting place.

We were to play fourteen weeks at the Apollo Theatre before moving on to Detroit, a lawless kingdom of booze and flivvers, and then on to other key cities. I had made many friends in Chicago. Among them the late Judge Francis Borelli and his family, who never failed to see my shows, and entertain me on all my trips to Chicago. There was also a gang lord with mad green eyes and a face blue-black from a fresh shave, and he said, "We'll get together." But someone cut him down with a shotgun first.

But if one opportunity was lost to gunfire, there were others.

At the start of the *DIAMOND LIL* run at the Apollo, Jim had to make a business trip to New York. Our relationship had become non-romantic; we had settled like many a domestic couple for a friendly business partnership. However, in spite of the fact that we had come to terms, Jim persisted in behaving like my stern guardian; a very strict guardian who has in his charge a wayward and minor girl child that has to be protected from her own urges against the inclinations of wicked men.

Jim had a big financial stake in my career, and liking show business (so much so that he had given up his law practice and the chance for a judgeship in New York), he was ready to fight (he did punch a few wooers) against the intrusion of any male who could threaten the stability of his association with me. Someone had said his attitude was that of the dog in the manger, which I felt was not complimentary in its descriptive clauses.

"I'm only thinking, Mae," he said, "of the successful advancement of your career."

He acted as a dictator who stood watch over my offstage life.

In some ways, I suppose this restraint he imposed on me was a good thing. It kept me concentrating on my work and my career. But there were times when the restraint became too oppressive for me to bear.

With Jim away on this New York trip, I went as my emotions directed. In the interests of science, sociology, psychology, or the courting habits of actors, my affair with the man I call Ted is interesting.

Ted, aged twenty-six, was slender, with an attractive personality; athletic, he had done some boxing. He had been married for a short time and was then divorced. He had led, he told me, a normal love life prior to meeting me. We were mutually attracted, and developed an overwhelming desire for each other, but it was six months before it was convenient for me to get together with this particular man.

We hardly needed to say a word. He took my arm after the show and we went to my hotel suite. We were in each other's arms as soon as the doors closed. We both felt the special urges of our desires and neither was a prude. Our first frenzied meeting lasted from late on a Saturday night until four o'clock the next afternoon.

I had experienced other men who had performed as ardent lovers, but never for a period of fifteen hours. Ted said he was astounded and pleased at his own abilities. He had never experienced such a thing in his life before. I had learned it is impossible to judge or anticipate what a man's capacity for love can be under certain conditions—the right and proper conditions, as these were. I am sure there is some psychological factor involved in being ardently attracted to someone and carried away by these emotions.

It is interesting that there was very little conversation between Ted and me during the hours we were together. This led me to draw a simple conclusion: too much conversation is foolish for lovers, and may even destroy a mood.

After this one hectic weekend, there were no opportunities for Ted and me to be together for more than a little over a half an hour or so. I have been as frank as print permits. And I have set down an experience of a great single moment in my life as if it were a clinical experiment. It was much, much more, but words cannot convey it—not here. Prose is not enough.

My life was still mainly that of a star of the legitimate theatre, mostly living in public, with Jim as a dangerous guardian. If I have overstressed, as some may think, the physical, I will now relate my first adventure into the occult.

During 1928 and 1929, while I was playing *DIAMOND LIL*, I found myself having slight attacks of abdominal disturbances. A steady pain that would start on the lower right side of my abdomen and would last for at least twenty minutes, sometimes longer. This attack would come on without warning, as a headache suddenly does, and leave me in the same way. It proved I was as sensitive as any other woman, and I began to worry as to its cause.

I never had any real sicknesses, and I couldn't imagine what this illness could be. I consulted a good physician and had X-rays

taken. But neither doctor nor the X-rays furnished any satisfactory answers. It was, however, definitely established that I did not have appendicitis, at the cost of several thousand dollars. I began to get the pains two or three times a week, and then there were some weeks I would have them every day. They often came at inconvenient times, when I was on stage in the show. I would have to have the stage manager hold long intermissions on these occasions. It made me so desperate that I had almost made up my mind to have an exploratory operation, to see what was causing my dismal condition.

In Chicago, after some severe attacks, Jim called me at the hotel. "I'm bringing a Yogi up to see you, Mae. A man from India. He is a real healer. May we come up now?"

"I'll try anything. But park his cobras in the lobby."

Jim introduced me to Sri Deva Ram Sukul; his card read "President and Director of the Yoga Institute of America." I wasn't having any attack that day, but we discussed the condition that was bothering me. After a few moments, Sri sat down before me and took my hands in his, and started to recite something that sounded like an involved guttural prayer. He was a lean, dark man with very large dark eyes—and showed no signs of the occult—not even a beard or an opal ring.

I felt trapped in some Houdini-designed mumbo jumbo, but I was desperate enough to try even Congo witch doctors. I couldn't understand Sri—he prayed in Hindu, Jim said. It took about three minutes. Then he said, "Please stand up." He stood behind me and placed his hands, with a firm pressure, on my abdomen muscles for about two minutes.

Sri said, "I'm sure you will be all right now."

I wondered if this were some kind of a joke—a show business rib, which Jim was playing on me. But one look at Jim's face showed me it was no joke, not to him anyway. I thanked him, and he and Jim left.

Later, when Jim returned, I asked him, "When will the Sri be back to give me another treatment?"

Jim said, "He said you wouldn't need another treatment. You're all cured."

"Cured? I've had these spells almost two years. He just put his hands on me for two minutes, and mumbled something. What does this guy think he is?"

Jim laughed. "Well, we'll wait and see how good he is."

"What's his fee?"

"Nothing. He's not a member of the American Medical Association."

I went to the theatre that evening expecting an attack, but I didn't have one. The next day I was expecting it again for sure. But nothing came. I remembered that sometimes I wouldn't get my spells for two or three days. I continued to expect them. But they never returned.

I didn't see the Sri Sukul for some time. He had left a book and a pamphlet for me with Jim, to read. I tossed them into my trunk drawer and forgot about them. Later I recalled them and looked for them, feeling very ungrateful that I hadn't read them as he had requested. But they were gone.

This event was the first crack in my material universe. I had accepted a world of rewards, of daily, petty good and evil, things I could keep or discard, of love, physical and real, to touch and feel. I was unwilling to accept anything that was beyond my logic or my reason; a pleasant world of inanimate objects like money, cars, suites, good reviews, diamonds, clothes, strong lovers. I had come a far way on my philosophy of the *now* and the *here*. My world was one of solid available absolutes that could be counted and handled and explained, even exploited. And suddenly this occult thing of just a prayer and a pressure made me doubt, draw back from a sureness of myself. The wonder of it frightened me at times, but the cure lasted. And I knew that in

some marvelous way I had touched the hem of the unknown. And being me, I wanted to lift that hemline a little bit more.

The nation was to be shocked out of its absolutes, too. The country was in the grip of a great bull market and everybody was busy playing the stock market. Actors were millionaires (on paper). Producers and playwrights didn't bother too seriously with the stage. They were making easy money (on margin). The stage dressers, the maids, the shoeshine boys, all had a few shares of stock. The bootleggers couldn't bring booze in fast enough nor age it properly in their bathtubs. Then something happened.

It was the fall of 1929 and the calls for margin began to come in. People sold their cars to cover their falling stocks. It was only a little reaction, all said. But the calls for coverage began to come in at a quicker pace. People left the theatres to call their brokers. Actors muffed lines trying to see the stock listing held up to them in the wings.

I was free of the rising panic. What money I had was in show business, and in my diamonds. I didn't invest in something I couldn't sit and watch. But I was aware of the rising storm. Then *Variety* printed its famous headline: "WALL STREET LAYS AN EGG." The panic was on.

In my world, actors were ruined, shows closed, backers blew out their brains, almost everybody's face was green and drawn. Layoffs began. The theatres were so empty that a vaudeville actor coined the famous line: "The place was so empty you could shoot elk in the balcony." Joe Frisco is said to have asked a friend, "Do you have change for a match?"

"Sonny Boy" blared from every radio, and 5,000 apple sellers stood on New York street corners, a lot of them actors. The hotels were 70 per cent empty, and actors owed them \$500,000 in back room rent. Hubert's Flea and Freak Show in Times Square had

to lay off its acts, and President Hoover settled himself firmly in his high stiff collar and said, "Conditions are fundamentally sound."

Twenty-five thousand actors were out of work, brokers were jumping from windows. Fred Allen claimed they were jumping hand in hand. Across the nation, six million were unemployed. I continued to tour on the road.

So Long, New York



I WAS NOW a national figure, as I learned on this tour with *DIAMOND LIL*, during the early days of the stock market collapse. I would arrive in some large city and often be met by the mayor and other city officials. I'd say: "I like to see something of the city I am appearing in. Its public buildings, parks and above all, its zoo. I'm crazy about animals, especially about lions and monkeys, they're so human in many ways."

Often I'd also visit the corrective and mental institutions. I was intrigued by criminology, psychology and psychiatry, and there was material there for my plays.

In St. Louis I met Dr. Elbert J. Lee, a psychiatrist, head of the mental institution there. At one time he had been director of state mental institutions in New York and afterwards he became a Missouri State Senator. Not that there is any connection between his two careers.

Dr. Lee was constantly with Jim and myself. I learned much in visiting the institution with him, meeting the patients, and studying their cases. It was intensely fascinating and I got some of the books Dr. Lee had written and read them with interest. If

it's a morbid side of my nature, it may be because everything in life interests me. And love is a madness. No one is sane at times of emotional frenzy, or is it the world that is out of step?

On a tour to the West Coast, Larry Lee, a fine journalist, was hired as assistant publicity man. One day Larry brought my mail backstage to me. I glanced through it quickly. I have always received a great deal of mail, some of it odd, some of it amazing, a little of it sick—and the rest requests of all natures, not all for money.

There was a business letter from a manufacturer, who had visited the Royale Theatre in New York. He was a crude type, a vulgar, loudmouthed individual nobody liked very much, who was charmed with himself and blind to his own faults. The letter offered me some kind of a business proposition. It was phrased in common terms and contained many expressions of over-familiarity. It made me angry at this fool and Babbitt.

I said, "Take a letter to this obnoxious lout and tell him not to bother me again. Period." I made certain off-the-record remarks that were unflattering to the man's character, brains, and I even questioned his legitimacy. Lee scribbled away on his pad. He knew no shorthand. "Send that out right away."

"Yes, Miss West."

A few days later, I received another letter from the boor.

Dear Mae Baby:

I have received your letter and it is the funniest and cleverest letter I have ever gotten. One of my associates read the letter, that nearly tore his insides out laughing, and put it up on the bulletin board. I am getting a lot of ribbing from the other associates in the firm, but you sure can (and a great deal more).

I wondered what could have been so funny. I asked Larry for a copy of the letter. He said, "I didn't make a copy of it, Miss West—no carbon paper—but I put in everything you said."

"You don't mean you put in all the low-down things I said about him?"

"Sure. I read his lousy letter after you threw it in the wastebasket."

"I better burn my mail after this."

"Only a bum could write a letter like that to a lady. You said—remember?—if he ever opened a book on etiquette the pages would fall out, and that you wished you could think of him as just a poor, good-natured bum, but he wasn't poor and he wasn't good-natured. And you signed it 'Cordially yours.'"

"That part I remember. Let me read over what I say in my letters from now on."

For me, touring in *DIAMOND LIL* was a delight. The play pleased people. The occult Sri had cured my body of some mysterious illness. The company was full of handsome and charming men. I had long since discarded any idea of sin in relationship with the biological facts of nature and the amorous play of emotional human beings. But with Jim on guard, it did become a comedy of forbidden games and secret dramas in hidden rooms.

I was thinking of writing a novel. A play is soon finished, remembered only by its photographs and yellowing reviews. A book lasts as long as someone keeps it on a shelf. I had met an actor in New York called Howard Merling. He was playing Eben in O'Neill's *Desire Under The Elms*, starring Walter Huston. He came backstage to my dressing room for a visit after a matinee performance. Bea Jackson, my colored maid, interrupted us.

"You said, Miss West, I could leave early to go uptown to Harlem to see my aunt. I gotta be back in time for tonight's show."

"Sure, Bea, run along. I hope your aunt wears a derby hat and dances well at the Savoy."

When Bea had gone, Merling said, "Harlem is a great place. It's not just New York's black belt. I live uptown right on the fringe of it."

"What else is there?"

He told me some startling things about what went on in that section of Manhattan. Negroes had become the rage of society. Artists and Critics like Covarrubias and Van Vechten had taken them on. Their vices charmed thrill seekers. The newspapers were printing a so-called exposé of Harlem night life. I hadn't paid much attention to it.

Merling said, "The newspapers are only scratching the surface of what really goes on."

"It might be interesting."

"Mae, maybe you ought to do a play on the subject. Mixing the black and white theme together."

"It would be too daring. I don't want the police coming back."

"You're about the only writer who could do it successfully. There are books like *Nigger Heaven*, but only intellectuals read them. I mean the longhair village types."

I brushed off the idea. I wasn't ready to write another play. *DIAMOND LIL* was going out on a second tour. But the idea persisted in the back of my mind. The subject offered interesting possibilities.

Merling said, "I'll do some research around Harlem's night life for you."

By the time I was ready to go on my second road tour with *DIAMOND LIL* in 1929, Merling said, "I've compiled a lot of rich data about the high life and low down on Harlem. All about the speaks, the numbers rackets, the clip joints, night clubs; the fly characters white and black that make Harlem."

"I must admit I have already dreamed up a basic plot, characters and story line."

"I knew you couldn't resist it. Not all this authentic background and factual detail. I'll show you my notes."

He gave me a stack of dog-eared yellow paper in a small indecipherable hand.

I said, "I hope you can read your own writing, Howard. I can't."

"Maybe."

"I'm leaving with *DIAMOND LIL* for a tour to the West Coast. There's a part in the show you can play. You can recite this material you've collected to me."

"What's the role?"

"A Chinaman. You're a master of makeup and when you do the part, they'll think you just arrived from Hong Kong, or at least from New York's Chinatown."

"I don't know. I'm a sort of serious actor who prepares for a part from his insides out."

"You can eat rice three times a day."

"It's a challenge. A chinaman? I'll take it."

I absorbed the Harlem material on tour—but a personal tragedy drove it from my mind. While playing San Francisco, I received word that Mother was seriously ill. I asked to be kept informed of her condition, and the best doctors or specialists were to be called in. I wanted to call off the last weeks of the tour, but too many people depended on me to go on.

I went on to Los Angeles to conclude the engagement. And there I received the dreadful news from home that Mother was not expected to recover. It was a staggering blow. I was demoralized with anxiety and the urge to get home to her. I canceled all further bookings, chartered a special train, and transported the entire company of more than sixty people back to New York.

Jim tried to console me. "How was she when you left, Mae?"

"She had been feeling perfectly well, but she had gone on a diet and been reducing too strenuously. It has now affected her liver, and she has contracted pneumonia."

"The doctors can handle it."

I never knew the United States was so large. Nevada, Kansas, Ohio, the change at Chicago, the night ride, then the Hudson at last in the morning sun. The doctors made heroic efforts to save Mother. She lived for a few days.

Her death was the greatest shock and deepest sorrow of my life. I had always managed to remain calm in the many emergencies and crises in my own life. This was the most crushing blow, and I was frantic with grief. I dramatized my sorrow and became wildly hysterical and frenzied. Father and another man had to hold me as I howled for self-destruction.

I lost my power of speech for three days. Later the doctor said, "Your reactions were so extremely severe that if it weren't for the fact that you possess a strong heart and a good physical constitution, it might have been fatal."

I turned my face to the wall. Nothing mattered. Father made me promise I would never see him in death. "I would never want you to go through such a bad experience again, Mae."

It took time before I could adjust myself to the thought that Mother was gone. I could not look at any of her personal things or her pictures, so alive and alert. I didn't have any religious convictions that would give me hope of seeing Mother again some day, in another life. The here and the now was my philosophy. "When I am," I remembered someone saying, "I am. When I am not, the world is not." Later I found out that is called being a stoic.

From childhood I had feared the thought of burial underground. I purchased a family room in Cypress Hills Abbey for Mother.

Several months passed. My grief was subdued a bit to where I was able to do some creative work again. I tried my first novel. It was to be the Harlem story. The new challenge of a new writing form would cloud my grief, I hoped.

I was too weak to fight the material as a play. A book author had more freedom of expression than the stage permitted at that time. I went to work on it. I saw the story and wrote it as it came to me. I had no trouble finding a publisher. One came to me when rumors got around I was doing a book.

The world was going mad. I went on writing. Brokers leaped

from windows. I wrote. The President sank his head in his high hard collar and said, "Prosperity is *just* around the corner." I plunged deeper into my novel. More apple sellers appeared on street corners. Goldman Sachs became a joke. Bankers went to jail. I wrote and finished my book.

Macauley's published it under the title *Babe Gordon*. Then in a prize contest for a title suggested by its readers, they selected *THE CONSTANT SINNER*, under which it appeared in subsequent editions. It made literary critics sit up and turn pale. It sold well. The book went through five editions, and was the biggest seller Macaulay had had in five years.

My play *SEX* had not played since 1926. The Shuberts wanted me to take the show on tour. I was recovered enough from sorrow and prose to open *SEX* at the Garrick Theatre in Chicago, late in August, 1930.

I was alive and living again. I felt my old drive, my familiar urges. But Mother's passing left a permanent dark spot in my life.

Following the tour of *SEX*, I received a call from J. J. Shubert. "Mae, what do you think about doing a play from your novel *THE CONSTANT SINNER*? All the ticket brokers seem to think it would make a great play. Anytime anyone backs their ideas with money, I listen, Mae."

"This must be the right time."

"Go right ahead."

The novel adapted well to the medium of the stage. Most of the book dialogue could be retained. By the use of a jack-knife stage, all the important settings in the book could be kept.

A jack-knife stage literally works like a jack-knife, as two platforms on wheels correspond to the two blades of the knife. Sets are mounted on the two blades. The closed blade is the set facing the audience while the scene is being played. The other blade is mounted with a set in readiness for the next scene to be played.

When the scene being played is finished, the stage is blacked out, or a scene curtain is drawn. Stagehands swing the used set back upstage like a blade in open position, and the waiting set is swung down to face the audience. They have to work swiftly and quietly so that no noise is made that would distract the audience's attention from the scene being played. Sometimes they are that quiet.

THE CONSTANT SINNER is the story of Babe Gordon, an amoral lady of pleasure, whose career takes her from the dives of Harlem to the smart circles of New York and Paris.

There were eighteen scenes in *THE CONSTANT SINNER*, a cast of forty or more people, both black and white. I was supported among the principal male roles by Walter Petrie, "the handsomest leading man on Broadway"; Russell Hardie, who later in Hollywood appeared in many motion pictures; George Givot, a wild, humorous man, tall, wide and always ready for a good time—he later made a reputation in Greek characterizations—who played the Negro king of the Harlem numbers racket; and Walter Glass, who later played in pictures under the name of Ray Walker.

The play was a hit at the Royale. We had to operate two ticket offices to take care of the crowds.

THE CONSTANT SINNER was an expensive show to produce and operate. The Shuberts had gone all out to make it a beautiful production, and its many sets required a crew of twenty-one stagehands to handle them properly and swiftly. But by the spring of 1931 when we opened, the cost of theatre tickets had risen well above the prices of 1926, when I first starred in *SEX* at Daly's Theatre.

As a depression spread thick across the land, I determined to play the show as long as I could. I liked the role of Babe Gordon, the constant sinner. As somebody wrote of her, she was "the kind of woman every man wants to meet—at least once."

In time the part grew routine, but I never let down. There was

something else I wanted to do—but I wasn't sure what. A new play? A new novel? No. Not yet.

We played through the season and into the summer of 1932. It was a strenuous show for me, with many quick changes of costume, and theatres at that time had no air conditioning. I closed the show for the hot weather months, and agreed to reopen it at the beginning of the new season in September. By this time Hollywood was making gestures at me.

The box-office for motion pictures was hard hit by the depression. Talkies had destroyed many of the silent film idols. They needed stronger personalities, more powerful stories to bolster a sagging business. They wanted me very much. I wasn't sure.

William Morris, Jr., was my business representative and he came to me with a good offer. I insisted on seeing my film part before I accepted the contract. "But, Mae, the story for the screen, based on a *Cosmopolitan* Magazine story by Louis Bromfield, hasn't been written as a screenplay yet."

"Is that the way they make movies?"

"You'll have to leave for Hollywood right away. Your salary starts from the time you board the train in New York. Ten weeks, at \$5,000 a week. Is that bad?"

"Not if the part is good—I mean, strong. As for the fee, I've been getting much more money than that in my shows from royalties and being a 50 per cent owner of the productions."

"It's all right as a start, Mae. Motion pictures are a new field for you."

"They still make them about men and women don't they?"

I was happy to hear they did. I didn't feel even Hollywood would change such a successful combination.

I saw the changes in the world around me, and knew the old ways and habits of Broadway had been disturbed and often destroyed by the still raging depression. The election of F.D.R. to

the White House meant hope, but no guarantee of old times.

Lots of old favorites were going. Mayor Jimmy Walker, trapped among his grafting pals and tin box holders in bank vaults, resigned under pressure. Kruger, the Swedish Match King, killed himself; maybe not enough people were aware it was wrong to light three on a match. The Lindbergh kidnaping made most of the plays look tame.

Attendance had dropped 50 per cent in the film theatres, and double features and free dishes were added. Warner Brothers were \$30,000,000 in the red, and Clara Bow was through at Paramount. I could have her old dressing room if I wanted it. I didn't. William Haines, Ramon Navarro, John Gilbert, once top stars—their dressing rooms were also available. Their shrill voices had destroyed them for talkies.

Did I want to go to Hollywood where only a few gangster films made money? Could I stay in New York with the Palace Theatre losing \$4,000 a week? Broadway was in real trouble. Of 152 plays that season, 121 folded. Maybe, I decided, I'd take a fling at Hollywood.

Hello, Hollywood



HOLLYWOOD in the early 1930's, when I was lured west to make leaping snapshots talk, was a world that had become moss-grown with daffy legends and heavy with a success that had turned to panic when Al Jolson sang to his mother in *The Jazz Singer*. Suddenly the bottom had fallen out of the golden goose (if that's a mixed metaphor, let it lie) and the interior of the fabulous beast was found to be empty.

The golden silent days of the pioneer dream merchants was over. The make-believe era of Gloria Swanson, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Mack Sennett, D. W. Griffith was over. A few of the old masters would hang on—Charlie Chaplin sometimes bringing back his little tramp; Cecil B. DeMille putting bigger and bigger bathtubs into the Bible; and Gary Cooper would merely remount and reload, and go on. But in the main, the times of the Duesenburgs and Rolls-Royces longer than tapeworms, the clatter of the Charleston parties of the roaring Twenties, the wild Eric von Stroheim world, the tragic heartbreak of Wally Reid and Fatty Arbuckle was finished, put away on the back shelves with Bronco Billy, John Bunny and William S. Hart.

The need of the film studios for words, for actors who could speak them, established a demand for talent from Broadway. Many were called; few remained. Would I make it in a land of palm trees, restaurants shaped like derby hats, goosefleshed bathing beauties and far-flung custard pies? Could I show my stuff in the city of oranges, Warner Brothers and swimming pools? I had no doubt about my talents, but I was aware I faced a barrier.

Jim advised me to ride easy on the contract from Paramount Pictures. "Mae, it's a vacation for you, and you'll learn the technique of the studios, which should interest you."

"My part interests me more."

We left New York on June 16, 1932, and the trip by the still un-airconditioned, steam-drawn trains took a full four days. En route I had received a telegram from my agents that I would be met at Pasadena ("Nobody important rides all the way to L.A.").

I tried to recover from the jolting across the sun-blistered deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, getting relief from the blasting heat by holding an ice bag to my head as the electric fans had merely swirled the tired torrid air around. I left my drawing room for the first time on the trip when we reached Pasadena.

I told the press, "So this is the place a leaf falls up in some canyon and they tell you it's winter."

I was greeted by Murray Feil of the William Morris Agency and a herd from Paramount's public relations department. Newspapermen and photographers interviewed me and took a lot of pictures in the lime-white sun of California.

"Yes—I played *DIAMOND LIL* in Los Angeles two years ago—but now I'm here to make talkies. I hope the film can take the temperature."

I was driven to Hollywood, where there had been reserved a spacious apartment at The Ravenswood, less than a mile from Paramount Studios. I have retained the apartment ever since.

"Paramount asked for me and I am here."

Jim said, "Settle down."

"For how long?"

"You're on salary."

"That's a pretty dull answer."

The first week passed. I hadn't seen the script for the picture. But I received my five thousand dollars. A second week passed. More money, no script.

"Doing nothing," Jim said, "isn't a bad script in itself."

This went on into the seventh week. Jim had been right.

"It's turning out to be a nice vacation. But I'm getting more and more curious to see the script. This delayed climax makes me feel I'm living a suspense picture, and not a very good one."

Finally, I received the script—over a hundred pages of text bound in yellow cardboard: *Night After Night*. It was marked FIRST ROUGH DRAFT, which made me wonder if there would be a second, third and maybe *final* "rough" draft, before they started with a *first* "final" draft. If that sounds silly, it isn't; it happened that way.

I read the script. It was nothing that I had expected. My part was very unimportant and banal. The dialogue did nothing for me. I told the studio brass, "You can get almost anyone to play the part."

"But, Miss West, it's your personality we need."

"My personality would be wasted in a part of that kind," I told them. "Any doll under contract can play it."

"Miss West, you are under contract."

I stalled another week. I decided I'd better not do *Night After Night*. It was George Raft's first starring picture and I had read Louis Bromfield's magazine story. It was good, but I didn't like the way it had been turned into a screen-play.

Jim and I went to see Al Kaufman, one of the heads of the studio under Zukor, and the Paramount executive most directly concerned with the picture.

"I have decided I want to go back to New York. It would be a

big favor, Mr. K., if you would just take back all the lovely money that has been paid me for salary, and let me go."

"Miss West, it's true you haven't worked all these weeks, but I feel you can keep the money and do the picture."

"No. I've had a nice vacation in Hollywood, but I don't like the part. Please take the money and let me out of my contract."

"I am surprised and disappointed that you feel that way. But I refuse to accept the money, and I am very unhappy that you are thinking of leaving."

William LeBaron, the producer of *Night After Night*, called me that night. "Mae, let me suggest that you take the script and rewrite your part as you see it. Everything can turn out nicely if you do."

"I can try, but only for you, Bill, because I knew you in New York."

"We're not all nuts out here."

"You'll have to prove it to me."

"Go to work."

I entirely rewrote my part and gave myself my best-styled dialogue. What was good for me was good for the picture, as *Night After Night* showed.

I hadn't seen William LeBaron since *A la Broadway*, in 1911. I had recognized him, but it had taken him a moment or two to place me as the teen-age Mae West. After I got him to let me make changes in my part he said, "You haven't changed in this regard. I remember your success in my early show after you changed your part. Go ahead, rewrite the part in *Night After Night* all you want."

Bill's presence in the studio as my producer was one of the factors in my deciding to stay on at Paramount and make the picture. I didn't know until much later that George Raft, in choosing his supporting cast for *Night After Night*, had requested me for the picture.

I needed a cool mind every second to meet the challenge of this

first picture. I have never asked for second chances. With me there is no "next time things will be different." Things must be different the *first* time, or I'm through with it. A tough philosophy and often a painful one.

It was all a new medium, a technique I had to learn, bend to my will, and forget, in order to give a natural performance.

I met the director, Archie Mayo, fat and friendly. We decided on an armed truce until we got to know each other better. He agreed to let me work on my dialogue while the picture got ready to shoot.

I saw some of the town, met some of the sodden gilded people, breathed the air mixed with orange blossoms. I saw that under the daffy California sun there had hatched out as queer an industry and as odd a collection of self-made men as ever crossed the Rockies with dollar cigars in their teeth. Power, passion to own and run, and sharp dealings made pictures. The studios were giant factories turning out the same length of scented tripe, dressed up with the same rubber stamp features of large cowlike heads, mammary glands, and ten-foot-high closeups of nostrils you could drive a Cadillac into.

The producers were mostly ex-cloak-and-suiters, glove or glue salesmen, or vaudeville managers who had grabbed a good thing and were annoyed that they now had to have writers and actors to create the reality for the new words the talkies were sprouting. It was a world that came awake with an economic hangover, and instead of being thankful it was being saved, tried to assault its rescue teams.

I concentrated on rewriting my part in *Night After Night*, giving it more of my kind of dialogue, building in laughs, and shaping the character with all the awareness of my years in the theatre, vaudeville, legitimate stage work and playwrighting.

Archie Mayo grew on me as a character. He was an excellent picture director. But, alas, he had no background of real theatre.

He had learned his craft, picture direction, as a film editor in the cutting room. "A very practical training school for any aspiring movie director, Miss West," he said.

"I'm sure it is, Archie."

"It teaches camera angles, scene composition, continuity and movement."

"But does it teach a feeling for theatre, or creative direction?"

"Oh, them things. A director either has or hasn't got it to begin with. You're in good hands, Miss West."

"I've heard that before."

Archie Mayo was ball-bearing shaped, a bundle of energy and bounce. He had a Hollywood sense of humor and loved gags, like the hot foot, the pulled-back chair, the lace panties in a husband's pocket and the knobs removed from a bathroom door. It was better than a box-office hit. He was amusing to work with—but not at first.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I have never seen you before and don't know anything about your technique—how you work. The only thing I know is that you were a Broadway legitimate stage star, who has never made a picture."

"You'll find I learn quickly. Real quickly."

I watched them shooting studio scenes. I noticed that the actors didn't know their lines, the director didn't seem to be sure of what he was doing. They would shoot a scene over and over, one expensive take after another. The director would then get some ideas by seeing the mistakes the actors were making. That is extremely expensive.

"That's where all the money is going," I said to Jim, "in picture production. In time wasted, film wasted, guessing and second-guessing. A picture costs thousands of dollars a day to shoot."

"Mae, it's not real money to them. It melts like snowflakes."

"You know nothing is real here."

Archie Mayo read my script with all the changes and new laugh lines. He asked, "How do you know these lines are going to be funny, Miss West?"

"I know audiences. I know what they laugh at, and I know what they expect from me."

"Broadway audiences, sure. Now you are going to have motion picture audiences."

"There isn't much difference in people, Archie. They have eyes and ears, and they all laugh at the same things if they are funny."

"I'm not laughing."

"You're no customer. You're in for free."

"First scene tomorrow."

On the first day's shooting I got into difficulties with the director over film footage. After my entrance, I had a line I knew would be a sensational laugh. I had to protect the laugh with film footage.

Trouble came after my arrival in George Raft's swank speak-easy and gambling house—on the set, that is. I wanted the camera to follow me when I spoke this line, while I walked away from the character to whom I had spoken and started up a long staircase.

"Cut! Why the long walk, Miss West?"

"I'm giving the line a chance to milk the laughs."

"And suppose there aren't no laughs?"

"Just keep the action on me. I'll give you laughs."

I had no intention of letting the camera cut away from me to something else the moment I delivered one of the big laugh lines.

"There needs to be that fraction of time, Archie, for an audience to hear the line, get its meaning and start laughing. Otherwise, the biggest laugh line in the world could be killed the instant it is delivered."

Archie said, "We know our stuff."

"It's what you do after a funny line that helps the laugh. You can cut the laugh off instantaneously."

"Yes. But, darling, pictures are different from the stage. You can wait for laughs. That ol' camera keeps on rolling. And does it cost money!"

"I don't have to *wait* for laughs. I just sort of roll with the punch—the punch line. When I walk up those stairs, that's the roll."

Archie couldn't see it. All work had stopped. People gathered. A studio crisis was on. I was going to get to the top of those stairs. Serious faces waited expressionless, not taking sides till someone big was on the ground.

A hollow square of yesmen arrived and exposed Emanuel Cohen, executive vice-president of Paramount in charge of production; also Bill LeBaron, the producer.

I explained our hassle to both of them. "The laugh can be built into a yell if it's done as I suggest."

Emanuel Cohen said, "Look, Archie, Miss West must know what she is doing. She is the greatest box-office in the legitimate theatre. Any dope knows that."

"She may be great in the legitimate theatres, but this is motion pictures, Mr. Cohen."

"I am aware what we make here."

"She doesn't know motion picture technique."

"Look, Archie," Emanuel Cohen answered, "you shoot it exactly like Miss West wants. After the preview, if it isn't right, we can cut it. Can I do more?"

The scene was shot my way and the top brass looked at the rushes (rushes are hurry-up prints made of film shot one day and viewed in the projection room the next morning), and my wise-crack drew a howl of glee and a choking on long cigars when I took my long walk.

"There, see what I mean?" Archie said. "A walk for what?"

"You mean, Archie, *what a walk!*" Cohen said. "Leave it in."

Archie Mayo said, "What a walk—we'll use that line in an ad."

"Let's see it again."

Again on film I walked into George Raft's fashionable clip-joint, and the checkroom girl took one look at all the diamonds I was wearing and exclaimed, "Goodness, what beautiful diamonds!"

"Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie," I replied, and moved away and up the stairs again into motion picture history.

Then there was the problem of acting technique. I had to change my normal tempo or pace. As a rule, I have most actors around me work faster than I do; they keep the pace while I take liberties in my timing—timing is an actor's rhythm and pauses. But in this picture I noticed all the scenes that preceded me were shot at a very slow pace. George Raft worked slowly and Alison Skipworth, who had a good many fat scenes in the picture before my entrance, worked very, very slowly. If I slowed up too, I'd be in slow motion.

I sat watching them shoot slow and slower scenes. It worried me; not only my performance, but the picture. I said to Jim: "This is so slow I'm afraid the audience is going to fall asleep, or perhaps start thinking of their homes, or their laundry or their dishes, or what they are doing at the movies. I better do something about the tempo."

Jim said, "You just got over a point. Not another so soon."

"Can I play slower than they are?"

"No, I guess not."

"If these people work so slowly and then I come in and work slowly—Jim, this picture will drop, drop, drop."

"You going to tell the director to shoot everybody faster because you like to work slow?"

"No. I have Archie upset as it is."

"So, Mae?"

"I'm going to change *my* tempo, and work fast, very fast. The picture needs a lift, a big lift to pick up the speed and wake an audience up, excite them."

"I hope it works."

It was very difficult for me to take on speed; I didn't know all my own lines! I had written them myself, but to give a fast performance you have to be very sure of what you are doing. I wasn't.

George Raft says in his autobiography, "In this picture, Mae West stole everything but the cameras."

No actor sees the final first cut picture till it's previewed with an audience. The George Raft-Mae West picture, *Night After Night* was booked at the Paramount Theatre.

The night of my screen debut at the Paramount Theatre in downtown Los Angeles, I could not get into a mood to see the picture. Instead, Timony and I went to another movie. After it was over, we picked up Murray Feil, of the William Morris Hollywood office.

He was no sooner inside our car than he began to rave about my performance in *Night After Night*.

"That first entrance of yours," he said, "when you said your line about the diamonds and then walked up the stairs, had the audience yelling with laughter. From then on, everything you said and did was great with them. You know I don't rave as a rule, but I have to now."

That was enough for me, for Murray Feil had a reputation for being unenthusiastic and for understating things. He was never what you'd call a "laughing boy."

Somehow I never did go to see *Night After Night*. Everybody liked it. I was afraid I wouldn't.



The Lady and the Lions



ALL THE THEATRE OWNERS, I was told, were calling up and wiring for a Mae West picture as quickly as possible.

I was asked to read several scripts. But none were, I thought, right for me. I tried to get out of my option. "I want to go back to New York and reopen my play for the Shuberts."

"No, no, Miss West. You belong here."

So I went on salary again. This still worried me, not working and getting money for nothing. I told Emanuel Cohen of the top studio brass, "The only thing I think would make a great picture for me is to do my play *DIAMOND LIL* on the screen."

"It's a period piece?"

"Read it first," I said.

Nobody reads in studios. Cohen gave the script to the head of the story department, then the studio tried to get me to do a different story. I dug up the story department report: "We don't think Miss West's play would make a good picture. The period—the Gay Nineties—would be all wrong for the movie goers who are college students, teen-agers and children."

I decided to go back to New York and forget Hollywood. I

said to Mr. Cohen, "You didn't read it, but here is a play that broke all box-office records in the legitimate theatres in all the key cities, the records in the Shubert theatres. Even the records of Lenore Ulric in *Lulu Belle*, Jeanne Eagels in *Rain*, the Barrymores in *The Jest*.

"Either my second is *DIAMOND LIL*, or I'm not here anymore."

Mr. Cohen sighed. "May I suggest that if we do *DIAMOND LIL* on the screen you could perhaps change the period to a modern story?"

"Why?"

"I don't think the period would appeal to the younger people. Up until now most stars that have gone into period costume have lost a pot of money and their audience."

It was the Hollywood pattern to fear change, novelty and new material. I scared them, but they needed me to help a sagging box-office. However, I was an outlaw. I didn't conform or say "Yes sir."

"Has the Gay Nineties period ever been done as a film, Mr. Cohen?"

"I don't think a picture has been made of that period. I don't know. I'll ask the research department."

"If this picture is made and is a success, it would mean every studio would be making pictures of the period. In fact, it could start a trend. And this town likes trends."

"Well—"

"Have the wardrobe department make me two period gowns, and then have a screen test made of me in the gowns to get a reaction."

"I'll do it. Now, if it goes, as to a director—"

"I would like a director who has seen *DIAMOND LIL*. Let me suggest Lowell Sherman, a former actor, a leading man on the legitimate stage, and a very amusing man, with a good sense of theatre."

I left Mr. Cohen's office with almost everything I wanted, and a feeling I was out on a limb and I'd better be sure it was a strong one. I had maneuvered myself into a position where everything was my responsibility on a picture the studio didn't want to make.

I talked it over with Jim. "I would like to take four of the lead actors in the story and rehearse them for one week before shooting the picture."

"They have never done anything like that before, Mac. They would have to pay them salaries for rehearsals."

"Let them. If the actors know their lines and are familiar with the mechanics of the scenes before we start to shoot, they'll be able to save thousands in production costs."

"They never count costs here."

"Money and time is wasted shooting so many takes of each scene. The shooting schedule is always running behind."

"Just write the screenplay. It's their money."

The screen version of *DIAMOND LIL* was changed to *She Done Him Wrong*. The studio okayed my one week's rehearsal plan that same morning.

As Al Kaufman and Bill LeBaron left the office with me, I saw a sensational-looking young man walking along the studio street. He was the best thing I'd seen out there.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Kaufman recognized him. "Cary Grant," he said.

"He'll do for my leading man," I said.

"But," Kaufman protested, "he hasn't made a picture yet. Only tests."

"Call him over," I said. "If he can talk, I'll take him."

Kaufman brought Cary Grant over and introduced him.

"How do?" he said, with a charming accent.

"Yes," I said at once. "He will play the lead."

"Don't you want to see a test?" Kaufman asked.

"No," I replied. "This man will be perfect."

Al Kaufman and Bill LeBaron laughed, took Grant into the office, and signed him up.

I attended many front office meetings. It's a Hollywood habit. I was called into the office of Emanuel Cohen. A meeting usually had eight or ten department heads present.

"How long, Miss West, do you think it will take to make this picture?"

I got tired of answering the same questions. A big production took at least fifteen to twenty weeks to make. I said, too casually, tossing a small bombshell at the heads, "I think *She Done Him Wrong* can be done in . . . mmmm . . . three weeks."

There was an aching silence; so deep and still that I found it restful. First came their puzzled expressions, then a smile of doubt and a sly look from one head to the other. I could read their minds transmitting, "We know it can't be done, don't we?"

We went into production and finished, without a retake, in eighteen days of shooting.

She Done Him Wrong changed the fashions of two continents. The styles of the Gay Nineties became the rage. "Mae West" was a household word. Everyone became Mae West conscious (even me). Diamond Lil's dialogue became popular wit. From lisping two-year-olds to octogenarians the current invitation was, "Come up 'n see me sometime."

I was pleased, but amazed. I always enjoyed my success, but this was overwhelming. Like most, I had accepted motion pictures. But I had failed to appreciate their impact, their selling power. More people had seen me than saw Napoleon, Lincoln and Cleopatra. I was better known than Einstein, Shaw or Picasso. And yet I had merely done in front of a camera what I had done for years, as well, on a stage. I accepted the success, but kept my same hat size.

I discovered that when I commented on anything at all, with no attempt at wit, it was considered hilarious. Newspapers quoted me on almost everything from the invention of the wheel (I was for it) to the color of George Washington's eyes (blue). They spoke of "Mae West's fresh humor and sparkling wit." If I asked for a cup of coffee, someone would search for a double-meaning in the simple thirsty request. Mae West jokes ran like greyhounds all over the land, and ranged from the comically "cute" through roughly risqué to frankly lewd. All the standard traveling salesman and farmer's daughter jokes were revamped to give them a Mae West twist.

Women were trying to walk and talk like me, and Mae West-Diamond Lil imitations, both amateur and professional, sprang up like a plague at the drop of the name or a feather boa. Women became more sex-conscious, and this, for some men, was a big break; for others, a bother. Sex was out in the open, and amusing.

I became suddenly a star seen in the third person, even by myself. I tried to view myself objectively and see myself as others saw me: A legend and an institution. It didn't frighten me. I got fun out of being a legend and an institution. I wanted to be just what I had been before Hollywood. But I soon saw I was a prisoner of my publicity and my success.

I didn't struggle much. It was a well padded, comfortable life and legend. My sister Beverly, who had been in several of my shows and was a talented actress, and my brother Jack joined me in Hollywood; a little later, my father, who retired from his business in the East, came to be with us, and the family was together again in one place. All that was missing was Mother. Three years after she died I still missed her terribly.

In December of 1933 Beverly had her own act, featuring an all-girl band, singing with her show in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, Louisville. One of her numbers was a song and imita-

tion of me as Diamond Lil. People thought it the best imitation of me ever done to that time.

Beverly had never understudied me. I have never had an understudy; never could, because my audiences have always come to see Mae West (rather, I regret to say, than the show in which I appeared). They always wanted a Mae West performance and no substitute.

Jim pointed out, "It has always been the case with a Charles Chaplin, a Bernhardt, the Barrymores, or any unique and great personality."

"I can accept a compliment—even that one," I said.

By this time everybody was "doing" Mae West, and it no longer excited me.

Beverly decided she liked Southern California, and made it her permanent home. She bought a place in San Fernando Valley called Palm Tree Ranch, and became interested in harness racing. She had a half-mile track on the place and maintained a stable of trotters. It was nice having the family all together, basking in the California sun.

My brother Jack loved sports cars and fast horses. He purchased a ranch in San Fernando Valley adjoining Palm Tree Ranch and had a stable of racehorses which he ran successfully.

More and more I tried to keep away from the Hollywood round of sterile pleasures, and just try and brighten a private corner where my friends and I were living our own lives. But it was hard to fight a legend, and few people knew that I didn't *always* walk around with a hand on one hip, or pushing at my hairdress and talking low and husky. I had created a kind of Twentieth Century Sex Goddess that mocked and delighted all victims and soldiers of the great war between men and women. I was their banner, their figurehead, an articulate image, and I certainly enjoyed the work.

One of my jobs was to make personal appearances. Early in

1933 I was in New York City at the Paramount Theatre with *She Done Him Wrong*. My friend, Lowell Brentano, an author and publisher, came to see me at the theatre and was vocally enthusiastic. Talk got around to what I might do for my next film.

"Through the years," I said, "I've always had a secret ambition to be a lion tamer. There is something about the big cats that appeals to me."

Before I left New York for the coast, Lowell Brentano brought me a circus idea—a full outline entitled *The Lady and the Lions*. I read it on the train going back to Hollywood. I didn't care much for the story line, and the characterization of the heroine was insipid for me, but I did see that the script would serve as a beginning for a circus picture.

Back at the studio, Emanuel Cohen said, "We intend to spend a lot of money on your next picture, Mae. What kind of a story would you like to do?"

"A circus story. In Madison Square Garden."

"That should cost plenty of money."

I had Paramount buy the script Lowell Brentano had written for me, called *The Lady and the Lions*, and revised it with a plot line, comedy situations, and dialogue to fit the characterization I envisioned for myself. We began production of the picture that was eventually to be called *I'm No Angel*, the story of a honky-tonk dancer who is also a glamorous lady lion tamer.

My childhood ambition was nearing fulfillment. I had seldom mentioned it, and only to intimates, whose response was invariably negative. How could they understand the driving, fiery compulsion I had toward lion taming?

Possibly it was my animal instincts that would lead me to visit the zoo the first chance I had whenever I was in a city that had one. There I would stand before the lions' cages, and visualize

myself in full command inside the bars. If lions really are killers at heart, I never thought of them as such in relation to myself.

I worked into the script a scene in which I would go along into a cage of lions. Then my secret desire increased in violence. The moment at which I would at last confront the beasts would be worth my entire success to me. I had no fear whatever.

As a matter of fact, I don't believe I have ever known fear of this kind. When I was about nine years old, I was playing on the beach at Coney Island when I heard a woman screaming. I looked up to see a small child being swept out on the crest of a big wave. Immediately, though I could not swim, I plunged in after the tot. An oncoming wave swept her back toward me so that I could grab her dress, get my arms around her, and lug her back to the beach. I could not understand why so many people asked me: "Weren't you afraid?"

The day before I was to make the scene inside the lions' cage, their trainer told me his animals were well trained and fairly tame, but admitted that there was always an element of danger. I listened to his instructions.

On the great day itself I arrived at the studio early in the morning, and hurried into my lion tamer's costume of white silk tights, white boots, white military jacket lavishly ornamented with gold braid, tall white plumed cap, and military cape of ermine. Then, with my entourage of maids, hairdressers, make-up men and assistants, I went on the Madison Square Garden set.

I waited an hour or so before Wesley Ruggles, the director, told me that we could not shoot the scene as planned. He looked very serious.

"The head trainer isn't here," he said. "And there is no one to double for you. You should have a double."

"Why?" I said. "It was understood that I was to get in with the lions myself for a few shots."

"But you don't understand," he said. "I didn't want to upset

you, but the head trainer had his arm almost torn off this morning by one of those lions. We figured he could handle them while you were in there, but now he's gone. Besides, the lions are restless."

I was grieved to hear of the accident, and said so. But my old terrific urge was not to be downed. Not when the means of satisfaction was so close at hand.

"Can't we go ahead with the assistant trainer?" I asked.

"I can't let you take a chance with those lions," Ruggles said.

When I protested, my producer, William LeBaron, was sent for to hear my story. He said it was a daring thing I wanted to do, and he agreed it would make the picture a lot better. But even he could not commit himself.

Then Al Kaufman came on the set.

I ran to him and blurted out: "This lion scene is the main reason I'm doing this picture."

Patently Al told me that the studio had an enormous investment in me and this picture. Aside from the humanitarian feeling of not wanting to have me mangled or killed, the business risk of losing both me and the picture was not to be taken lightly.

I still protested.

Finally Al said: "All right, Mae, I'll tell you what we'll do. Let's leave this scene to the last. We'll get all the rest of the picture shot, and then we'll do the lion scene."

"Oh, no!" I said. "You just want to put it off to the last moment, hoping I'll go cold on it. We're ready now, and I want to do it now."

I argued for a long time. At last they gave in.

After lunch I returned to the set, and things began to move. The lions were driven out of the cage, and the wicked lion who had hurt the trainer earlier in the morning was separated from the others. The cage was thoroughly cleaned from top to bottom to remove the sight and smell of blood.

Eventually things were ready. Cameras were set up to get the scene from different angles, since this was not something that could be taken over and over again. The lions were driven back into the cage.

Unknown to me, the studio had ordered men with guns loaded with live bullets to stand at vantage points outside the cage. They had been told to shoot to kill if any of the beasts made the slightest move to attack me. I was confident I would be safe, but apparently no one else was.

Over the loudspeakers the ringmaster announced the act. I made my entrance into the cage. The iron door clanged shut behind me. Then I was alone, facing the semi-circle of lions.

I began to move about, cracking the whip. I could feel the lions surrendering to my will, as they stared at me with their great, beautiful, dangerous eyes, fascinating me. They too seemed to be fascinated by this stranger in dazzling white and gold.

The lions snarled. Their immense paws reached out toward me. I stepped back and cracked my whip again.

Then the huge, glorious beasts began their act, leaping from stool to stool, rearing rampant, climbing a ladder and jumping to the ground to follow one another in a line that circled about me as I kept cracking my whip, acting out my dream role.

Excitement began to take hold of me. The thrill that had shot through me years ago when Father took me to see "Bostock and His Lions" at Coney Island tingled now throughout my whole being. But now it was multiplied a thousand-fold, charging me with electric voltage until I could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing but an overpowering sense of increasing mastery that mounted higher and higher until it gratified every atom of the obsession that had driven me.

"Cut!" yelled the director.

I patted the largest of the lions, bowed and left the cage. The work crew broke into applause and someone had to give the di-

rector a drink of water. I discovered I was smiling and couldn't close my mouth to stop it.

The preview at Grauman's Chinese was a special affair. It was the first really all-out big one since the depression had hit movie-town. This festival of glamour was a jamboree and very close to a dangerous street riot. I fought my way into the theatre past the roped-off noisy crowds lining the approaches, past the powerful searchlights fingering the empty night sky, and past screen stars looking their glamorous best, arriving with their handsome escorts. It was all glitter: the jewels, the agents' jokes, the radio wit and the usual clichés of "darling," "marvelous," "exciting," and of course, "the most colossal"; all of it is wonderful and full of a foolish magic which is the essence of motion picture making and often fun.

I'm No Angel proved to be a fantastic box-office hit. I had by that time a huge public waiting for any new picture from me and this one, I was told, smashed box-office records all over the world. "In the final accounting, Miss West, the picture made even more money than *She Done Him Wrong*."

"That's nice, isn't it?" I answered.

The New York newspaper which once recorded my jail ride and police raids now shouted:

WEST SCORCHES PARAMOUNT SCREEN

I'm No Angel Tonic Broadway Film Business Needed.

Mae West continues to give Broadway a grand old scorching. *I'm No Angel* is in its second week of its run at the Paramount. In its first seven days at this theatre, the newest West hit played to more than 180,000 people . . . a record attendance which tops the Paramount record by more than 10,000. Meantime, the West heat wave is rapidly spreading over the entire country. Reports from out-of-town relate record-breaking engagements in Detroit,

Dallas, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities where theatre-goers are literally accepting Miss West's invitation to "C'm up and see her sometime."

In *I'm No Angel*, Miss West portrays a colorful character, Tira, a hard-boiled carnival dancer, who becomes a New York sensation. On her rise to fame and fortune, she vamps any number of men, finally ending up besieged by her "tall, dark and handsome," a society millionaire. She sings five sensational songs, dances the "midway"—a spectacular variation of that shimmy which, we are told, she herself originated; wears lovely clothes, and she scintillates with wit in an hilarious courtroom scene.

Since the movies were in their swaddling clothes no star ever has so completely dominated a film as Mae West, but Paramount has cleverly surrounded her with a capable cast including Cary Grant, Kent Taylor, Edward Arnold, Gregory Ratoff, Dorothy Peterson, Gertrude Michael, Russell Hopton, and others.

I must confess that while I wrote all my own lines, I owed one of the funniest and best-remembered lines in *I'm No Angel* to Boogie, a cute pet African woolly monkey I cherished at that time. Boogie loved grapes, but he would always peel the tough skin off each of them with fastidious and exaggerated care before he ate it. He was an expert at it. It was Boogie who inspired my famous film line: "Beulah, peel me a grape!"

I found myself after this picture (there is no way to say this modestly) the most famous and popular motion picture star in the world, and if this sounds like bragging, how else am I going to say it?

I had come out to Hollywood with not too great hopes. I had managed to protect my character (on the sound stages) by rewriting my parts, and then writing my own screenplays. But the great acceptance of me as a woman character, who expounded the most liberal sexual ideas on the screen was an amazing thing. Not only to myself, the studio, or Hollywood, but to intellectual critics who never before wrote about motion pictures or actresses. And ordinary people, whose own lives were models of dull rou-

tine of ingrained respectability—even they were amused at me, and quoted my lines as catch phrases of the times.

For *Vanity Fair*, the avant-garde magazine of the period, where Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, Andre Gide, James Joyce and other heroes of the large-head set printed their modern words, I posed as the Statue of Liberty, freeing the sexually shy from their binding emotional blocks and repressions. George Jean Nathan is said to have seen it and said, "She looks more like the Statue of Libido."

F. Scott Fitzgerald said: "In a world of Garbos, Barrymores, Harlowes, Valentinos and Clara Bows, Mae West is the only type with an ironic edge, a comic spark, that takes on a more cosmopolitan case of life's enjoyments."

Hugh Walpole, the English writer, wrote: "Only Charlie Chaplin and Mae West in Hollywood dare to directly attack with their mockery the fraying morals and manners of a dreary world."

My personal life kept pace with my public one. I played as hard as I worked. I did not neglect my pleasures, but I did wish I had more time for them.



The Claws of the Censor



I BEGAN to understand what happened to people in Hollywood and I took care that the only things that happened to me were the things I wanted to happen. Too many Broadway actors in motion pictures lost their grip on success—had a feeling that none of it had ever happened on that sun-drenched coast, that the coast itself did not exist, there was no California. It had dropped away like a hasty dream and nothing could ever have been like the things they thought they remembered.

The bite of existence did not cut into one in Hollywood, and I watched myself and others and held onto reality.

One could live in it, I decided, if one understood Hollywood, and also understood what it wasn't.

I saw that love among these people existed no more than the night moistures that passed for summer rains on the yellow grasses of the landscaped hillsides. It was all the parties, all the record-playing, all the strong drinks in what the film people called a *montage*; one of those artistic arrangements of objects: bottles, faces, train wheels, clouds, all pumped full of music to take the place of real action, to advance the plot without telling anything

true and honest in detail. Life elsewhere was real and slippery and struggled in the arms like a big fish dying in air.

So I picked my company with care, and never became part of the social life of the town—and I resented their intrusion into my love life—the stories in the magazines. A woman should appreciate and respect a man's love for her, even when she finds she cannot return that love. She has no right to make light of it or belittle it. I would have liked to be nicer to several men but the circumstances were never right for us. Jim's furious objections to the news items were not professional, but personal.

The legitimate theatre had taught me that the success of a star depends upon a continuous love affair between her and her audience. The great star makers like Belasco, Daly and Frohman were right in guarding the private lives of their stars from public knowledge, and surrounding them with an atmosphere of mystery and romance and illusion. Who will pay to see a star when she is constantly visible for free in restaurants, night clubs, theatres, on the street? The thousands of women who wept at the death of Valentino are proof of how deep a vicarious love affair can be between a star and the public.

I have never liked that phase of studio publicity that makes a star's life a public display for all to drool over. When a star's love for this man or that is revealed in everything but the details of the sexual act, what remains for the public to love? They will be happy and will love the two-dimensional figure on the screen just as long as the heartbreaking details of the actual three-dimensional body are a secret. If all people had an exciting personal life, a full romantic sexual pattern, I wonder how many novels, plays and films would succeed?

At the same time the other studios began to try to create their own "Mae Wests." Jim said, "They can fill 'em, but they can't make 'em move."

The studios were trying to make my type of pictures and did not have real stars to put in them. They were driven to creating

synthetic stars. A synthetic star (feminine) was compounded of one part good looks, two parts breastworks, and a world of mad, wild publicity. "Shake well" was the motto—and top with a small dash of talent instead of a cherry. Often the result was like something created in the laboratory of a mad scientist.

The raw material for these experiments could be found almost anywhere: waiting on tables, clerking in drug stores, cheering in high school, carhopping at drive-ins, in bathing beauty contests, along tobacco roads and in the hill country. Only by the rarest good luck was it ever found in a theatre, and then usually as an usherette in tight pants or swirling dirndl.

I had created a demand for the uninhibited glamour—but I was sorry for the girls being trained like seals for the part. In the hands of studio glamorizers—the makeup artists, the wardrobe wizards, the still photographers, and the glib gentry of public relations—the raw material is molded into an effigy that the public is taught to accept as a movie star. They looked well until the public discovered the object of their bedazzlement was stuffed not with talent but with press clippings, and the lamé gown was a lame excuse for no acting ability and the static personality of a store window mannikin. All the glamorous witchery was accompanied by bitchery, for the synthetic star often only got by for a little time before her lack of talent was detected.

With no background of theatrical achievements to talk about, the studio press went in for candid closeups, personality profiles, a kind of saturation publicity that exposed everything about the poor drabs, including their falsies.

I never felt I needed to saturate my public with every detail of my private life, and I kept the facts of my personal affairs, my romantic relationships strictly top secret, even keeping my public happy in the belief that I belonged entirely to them, by persistently denying for years that I had ever married.

I am an egotist like all actors, but I never caught up with my success those first years in Hollywood, so quickly was I accepted

as a world star. William LeBaron, producer of all my pictures, issued a statement: "In the middle of the depression, the Mae West pictures *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel* broke box-office records all over the country, and broke attendance records all over the world. Her picture *She Done Him Wrong* must be credited with having saved Paramount Studios at a time when the studio was considering selling out to M-G-M, and when Paramount theatres—1700 of them—thought of closing their doors and converting their theatres into office buildings. Mae West is a life-saver to the motion picture industry."

With that kind of a record, the studio kept me busy. In the middle of 1934 another picture was in the works. I wanted to do a picture of the same era as *Diamond Lil*, but with a New Orleans locale. We started off with a production title of *That St. Louis Woman*. "Because, Mac, that's the city where the light of love you will characterize in the story began her gaudy and sinful career." Then it was called *It Ain't No Sin*, only to triumph in the final version as *Belle of the Nineties*. In Hollywood, no one ever likes any title—unless it's *Vice-President* lettered on a personal powder room.

For this picture I had three supporting men: Roger Pryor, John Mack Brown and John Miljan. Pryor was the son of the well-known military bandleader Arthur Pryor. He was a new face, with very curly hair; he'd had Broadway training and possessed an acting talent that made him believable. John Mack Brown was an ex-All-American football player—the handsome outdoor type. He later became a popular star of Western pictures. John Miljan was a seasoned veteran of years in pictures, and, having a mustache, was one of the suavest "heavies" in the business. Only Gable and Colman could play good men with mustaches.

We did hold onto the original title of the picture in one of the song numbers: "When a St. Louis Woman Comes Down to

New Orleans." A great deal of advance publicity and exploitation for this picture went out under the title *It Ain't No Sin*.

At this time the Hays Office, the industry censor, was under terrific pressure by religious groups and some lunatic fringe women's organizations to clamp a strict censorship on the Hollywood products. Following the enormous success of *She Done Him Wrong*, the studios had gone in for the fast and loose and the *double entendre*. My world-wide acceptance by the public was due to the personality I brought to every situation and every remark that elevated it to the cleverly risqué. Attempt by others to get the same effect resulted in the flatly dirty. "If the public likes what Mae West is doing, and she can get away with it, why can't we?" The result was an outraged howl from the blue-nosed moralists and the spoiljoys, *and* stepped-up censorship by the Hays Office.

I resented a type of censorship that quibbled over every line as if a devil were hiding behind each word. The most harmless of lines, when I spoke them, became suddenly suspect. "It's her sex-personality that radiates through everything she does or says," Emmanuel Cohen said.

The censor man asked me, "What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you because it isn't something you can explain by numbers. You take it or leave it."

Some people like to spoil other people's fun. Some make money by joining any crusade. The newspapers soon got into the act to peddle their papers. On July 8, 1934, the entire front page of the Chicago *Sunday Tribune* entertainment section featured five color photographs of me in costumes from the forthcoming picture. The caption read:

These Mae West pictures are from her latest film *It Ain't No Sin*, one of the productions affected by the anti-smut campaign against the Hollywood movie magnates. The costumes, dialogue, even the title of the picture typify a vogue, created by Miss West, which has swept Europe as well as this country, affecting styles and

conversations alike. The flip ribaldries uttered by her and other screen players in recent movies finally drew the censure of the Catholic and Protestant churches, with threats of a nationwide boycott of theatres that persist in showing questionable films. As a result of this, *It Ain't No Sin* was recalled by the producers for alteration.

The "alterations"—a matter of a few lines and shots—were made during the shooting on the recommendations of an official censor from the Hays Office, who was on the set every day, enjoying himself.

So the picture went out, cause of much interest because of attacks on its moral values. "Gentlemen," I said, "I'm not photographing The Outline of History—just my own outlines."

In some few instances state censors applied scissors to the film and some reviewers complained that these censors had murdered the story by inept cutting. However, the majority of the reviewers rated the picture "excellent." One reviewer wrote:

Best of the censored versions. Yes, in spite of all the interference, Mae West has given us a grand picture—almost as good as *She Done Him Wrong*. With good taste and laughs aplenty, Mae puts over her 1890 gal, and the lines she wrote for herself will have you in the aisles. Guaranteed to be all-West-and-a-yard-wide. Better see it, sure.

Leo McCarey, one of Hollywood's best directors, directed the picture and turned in a fine job. I sang some good songs as Belle. New ones, like "My Old Flame," "Troubled Waters," "When a St. Louis Woman Comes Down to New Orleans," "My American Beauty," and old favorites like "Memphis Blues."

I also used the now familiar lines, "A man in the house is worth two in the street," and "It is better to be looked over than overlooked."

The Hays Office leaned on a scene where The Tiger Kid (Roger Pryor) took Ruby Carter home to her apartment. The impression was conveyed (by lap dissolves) that the Tiger

Kid not only spent the night but several days. The lapse of time shown by the dissolves added up to a great laugh. The censor didn't laugh. He cut.

The Apollo Theatre in Chicago reported, "A whitewashed Mae West is still able to pack them in. Four weeks and still going strong."

I've never believed in going haywire on stage or screen. Obviously no medium of mass entertainment can be allowed to throw all restraint out the window. Strict censorship, however, has a reverse effect. It creates resentment on the part of the public. They feel that their freedom of choice is being dictated. They don't want their morals legislated by other than criminal law. The professional reformers, the organized pressure groups, the easily impressed do-gooders, can look upon the enormous obscenity that is war and do very little that is effective.

Every person who is not a moron or a mental defective of some sort carries a very effective censor and super-critic of his actions in his cerebral cortex—and in his heart. If that doesn't work, no amount of censorship from the outside will do anybody any good. None of this affected my personal life.

One could live a private life in Hollywood. I did. But I was outside the pattern. I didn't even drink. And no one went to a party without having a glass pushed into one's hand.

I got bored giving interviews, so I summed it all up in one line to a reporter: "Sex and I have a lot in common. I don't want to take any credit for inventing it—but I may say, in my own modest way, and in a manner of speaking—that I *have* rediscovered it!"

Hollywood treated me well after I fought to establish myself, but I always held it at arms' length like a would-be-lover one didn't fully trust.

Flying High, High, High



THE STUDIO demanded I keep making pictures, and I saw no reason to stop. *Goin' to Town* was a modern story, and like my last one, went through many title changes: *How Am I Doin'?*, then *Now I'm a Lady*, and finally *Goin' to Town*. Advance studio exploitation of the picture said, "Mae West goes modern, with seven leading men. Mae's a streamlined gal now . . . it increases her speed and cuts down resistance." "Mae will slay you when she sings grand opera!" This last referred to a scene at a society party in the picture, in which I was to burlesque some of the opera *Samson and Delilah* and sing "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice" while I toyed with Samson's flowing locks and gave him a crew cut.

The studio was pleased and people began to wonder how much money I was making. One report called *Vital Statistics* read:

Picture cost around \$800,000. Last West-ern (*Belle of the Nineties*) was one of the five biggest moneymakers of the year. Mae still is doing her bit to keep Paramount up in the black. Her salary is reputedly \$5,000 a week plus a percentage of the profits. Out of her \$250,000 a year, when all her expenses and taxes are

In my nightclub show,
"Mae West and Her
Adonises," 1955.



Presenting awards to Alan Stephen, "Mr. America," and John Farbotnik,
"Mr. Chicago," 1946.



In *She Done Him Wrong*, the Hollywood version of *Diamond Lil*, 1933.



With Adolf Zucker on the Paramount lot during production of *I'm no Angel*, 1933.



In *I'm No Angel* with Cary Grant.



Sid Grauman escorts me to his Chinese Theatre for the opening of *I'm No Angel*.



Goin' To Town, 1935.

In a dark wig for
Every Day's a Holiday,
1938.



W. C. Fields and I in
My Little Chickadee,
1939.





My birthday, 1949. The serenaders are from the cast of *Diamond Lil* in Central City, Colorado.



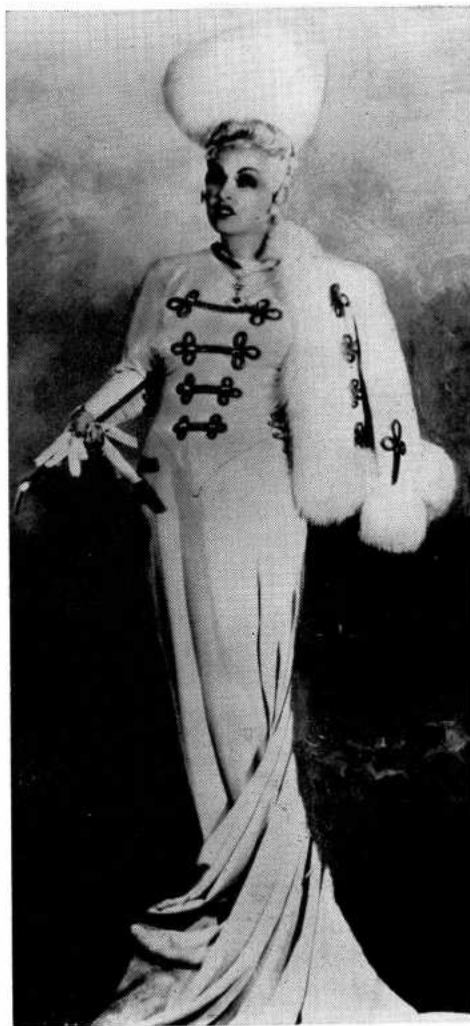
At home in my Hollywood apartment.



Statue of Mae West, with the sculptor, Gladys Lewis Bush.



The way I look tonight.



Catherine Was Great on Broadway
1944.



In the Michael Todd production
Catherine Was Great, 1945.

paid, she is left a mere \$75,000. (This guess was wrong. At that time I was receiving \$300,000 a picture, the highest salary in town for a star. I also got \$100,000 for a story.)

Looking over an old journal, I found the following notes that give some details of my personal, even domestic, life:

Living with brother Jack and sister Beverly in a Hollywood apartment house. Work on stories at night and rarely go places. Need work between pictures. I consistently reject requests to name commercial products, hamburger stands, and horses after myself. Will restrain anyone, legally, if they attach my name to a corset or a gas station.

I eat only a vegetable salad—with a steak. Do most of my writing in bed.

I kept no records of my emotional life—the score never interested me—only the game.

I had to acquire certain skills, or at least enough of them to be convincing in my films. I had to learn to handle a lariat with a certain amount of western ability, had to learn to be fast on the draw from the hips—a valuable part of my anatomy—and twirl a six-shooter like a real gunslinger. I had to acquire the knack of shuffling and dealing cards like a professional gambler, with an ace somewhere hidden to be put into the game when needed. I was also instructed in the art of Judo, which amazed a few overbold friends. I learned to play the drums and traps like a cool cat, and to mess around the piano with a boogie beat.

The Judo is, I suppose, the most valuable training I retain from my movie lessons. I don't need it for protection; it's fine exercise.

Will Rogers, the humorist and Beverly Hills' homespun philosopher, was being syndicated in the newspapers as a daily feature. Because of the popularity of my characteristic sayings and wisecracks, syndicates came to me to do the same sort of thing in my way. "You'll be able to write about anything you like, Miss West, so long as it is printable and funny."

"You make it hard for me."

I was about to fill the dotted line with my signature, when I had some second thoughts. I said, "Comedy is the hardest thing in the world to write. You have to be in the right mood for it. How do I know I'll *feel* funny enough day after day?"

"Of course you will."

"This thing might become drudgery. And I hate drudgery; not only the word, but the hard, boring work it stands for."

I remembered the New York columnist Don Marquis saying, "A daily column is a grave two inches wide and twenty inches deep." If that was what trying to be funny every day could become, I didn't want any part of it. So I never wrote a daily, witty newspaper feature, and never regretted I didn't.

I was busy having an international social life. And I liked every fancy moment of it. Nearly every important personage who came to Hollywood at that time was interested in meeting me, accepting as an invitation the world-wide message: "C'm up and see me sometime."

I had to take time off from busy shooting schedules to entertain some visiting VIP or trained seal on the set. I met Sir Ibrahim, Sultan of Johore, the world's third richest man, and his charming wife, the Sultana. I gave tea to Viscount and Lady Byng, who invited me to attend King George's jubilee in London. I did write a letter of regret: "Sorry, George—too busy." Lord Byng was a World War I hero of the battle of Vimy Ridge. A reporter said, "Mae called her guests 'Dearie' and 'Honey' which pleased Lord Byng very much." I admit everything but the "Dearie." I've never used the expression other than as a stage or screen remark in character. "Dear," yes; but usually in private.

Others who came were Mrs. Reginald Vanderbilt and Lady Furness, the gracious and charming sisters; Elliott Roosevelt, the President's playboy son; Gaylord Hauser, the health food diet expert (who was teaching Greta Garbo to swallow her sauerkraut juice and gobble the blackstrap molasses and wheat

germ goon foods); even Jimmy Braddock, then world's heavyweight champion, came to talk of uppercuts and grips.

Cary Grant brought over his dear pal Noel Coward, and the British playwright-actor-composer was on cue; delightfully sophisticated and as witty as any character in his smart plays. He was an actor off and on stage. Noel has gone on still the witty, gay charmer.

I was also made a Kentucky Colonel by Governor Ruby Laffoon of the bluegrass state. I got a very handsome, very official looking engraved certificate that affirmed the honor, conferring on me the colonelcy and all the rights, honors and privileges thereto appertaining as a member of the Order of Kentucky Colonels. Periodically, I am still invited to a gathering of the clan, but so far these events have always taken place when I was involved professionally or privately far from fast horses, slurred dialect, and mint juleps.

It's time I got romantic again on these pages. I met Vincent Lopez, the handsome young World's Heavyweight Wrestling Champion (not to be confused with the piano player-band-leader of the same name, although it would be an interesting confusion). He had just won the title and was packing the natives in at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. I looked and touched those shoulders and we became romantically interested in each other. I thought he would be a great bet for pictures, especially for the one I was about to do.

A test of Vince was made at Paramount. He was the biggest draw in California wrestling, and he had no time for films. There was something about a handsome brute crushing other brutes in a ring I couldn't resist. His record still stands.

"Forty-nine straight weeks, Mae, in the Olympic Auditorium, to a complete sellout every time."

"You're a darling, Vince."

"I make flying trips to Kansas City, Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. I am actually wrestling five nights a week and making from five thousand to fifteen thousand a week."

"An American success story," I admitted.

"So my managers aren't at all anxious for me to go into pictures. Not as long as I can draw seventy thousand at Wrigley Field, which is terrific money."

"Yes it is."

Vince was in the power of his managers. We were certainly a pair of star-crossed, sun-tanned lovers, beset by our two successful careers. They watched him so closely we had to devise various ways of seeing each other. Jim was also against our association, as he was against any association I might make which might upset the status quo. By this I mean, Jim enjoyed his position as first friend and business manager of the industry's top box-office star. As far as he was concerned, nobody, but nobody, was going to muscle in, romantically or otherwise.

Vince's managers got nervous about us, and sent him off to New York to wrestle dramatically at Madison Square Garden.

But we managed to meet over the years, managers or not, schedules or careers pushed to one side for brief encounters. It is love under pressure, grace under tension that is the sweetest passion for me. Reality is difficult to retain in the theatre and in Hollywood, and it was being with Vince for our stolen moments that gave me a deeper understanding of the loneliness of every one of us, and those rare moments when one becomes two—a delightful conception of nature.

I was going through a period of reexamining my moral values. Ethics and morals are a thing one has to struggle with. Good and bad, right and wrong, are as clear to me as sweet and sour, or black and white. But the trouble is that no moral question is either sweet or sour or just black or white. It's often bland and tepid, or gray and tan.

Evil on certain levels I can understand, but degrees of wicked-

ness puzzle me. Theft and unmarried love are supposed to be on the same evil level. To me a state of love is beyond that moral fence. A man and woman in love commit no sin if their codes are decent and they are honest only to two people: each other. I once knew a scientist who told me ants were about the only perfect moral citizens he knew. "They never appear in divorce courts, go on strike, write best sellers, or find one particular ant more attractive than any other ant."

I had felt that it is this device of romantic personal love (an invention, by the way, of the early Renaissance) that is causing all the trouble. One particular man or woman, or love as one particular attitude to a particular person, has certainly played the devil with mankind.

People who avoid this emotional trap seem to be no happier, however. The town's moral values are rather odd. Emotions almost always follow salary brackets. A woman star can go through four husbands and a dozen affairs in no time and still retain that earnest hunt for romantic perfection. There is no secret about anything and the pairings-off and the hasty marriages are items every day in the world press. It may be the climate or it may be a certain connection with the simple stories they film, but few of them really become cynical or defeated in their hunts for romantic perfection. Few see that they are incapable of honest emotional thinking.

In 1935 I was preparing for still another picture. I had written a play for myself about a year or so before I had come to Hollywood, called *Frisco Kate*. The studio liked the story, and bought it. I started work on the screen treatment, and immediately ran into a snag.

I received an original story by two writers, Marion Morgan and George B. Dowell. I was surprised to find the story line was similar to the one in my play. They had a character called Soul-

Savin' Annie that interested me. I talked to the studio about it and they bought the script. They were a little reluctant to do this at first. "Mac, all you're going to use of the story is the Annie character and some of the Klondike background. Why make writers rich?"

"It's still theirs."

"Please don't read any more scripts unless we give them to you. Don't even open them. Send them right back unopened. This script—you use hardly enough of it to make it worthwhile. So please, don't read any more scripts unless they come from us."

"I won't. But you better learn to respect writers."

A list of credits for the picture read like something by S. J. Perelman: *Klondike Annie*, from a play by Mae West and story by Marion Morgan and George B. Dowell. Additional material suggested by Frank Mitchell Dazey (I can't remember this boy or how he got into the act). Screenplay and dialogue by Mae West. Music and lyrics by Gene Austin and Jimmie Johnson. Directed by Raoul Walsh. Produced by William LeBaron for Paramount. Running time: 78 minutes.

That phrase "running time" is not just guesswork. An hour and eighteen or twenty minutes is showing time of the average feature film. What the public sees on the screen in less than two hours all looks so easy. It tells a story, but not the studio story of the weeks of preparation, the weeks of designing and executing costumes, the building of the sets, the months often of shooting the picture, the days spent developing and printing the film, cutting and editing the film and putting it together, more weeks getting the final prints of the film, hundreds and hundreds of man hours of labor, hundreds of thousands of dollars, even a million or so, for the production and exploitation costs. On the screen in one hour and twenty minutes it rolls by quickly. Likely as not some movie critics will look at it and say, "Ugh!" before others say, "Great!" Fortunately, the money-paying public has the last word. "They know what they like." Sam Goldwyn, the

sage of broken English, remarked: "That answer is unquestionable."

After the usual studio metamorphosis, *Frisco Kate* became *Frisco Doll*, then *Klondike Lou*, and the film ended up being called *Klondike Annie*. The more it changed, the more it was the same thing. The temperatures of the story—Golden Gate or Nome, Alaska—were at steamroom level.

The advertising department showed little restraint: "She Made the Frozen North . . . Red Hot!" "There's no place like Nome when Annie hits the Yukon!" "When it's forty below and there's nothing but snow, that's where the *WEST* begins!" "The one and only Miss West as the spell of the Yukon, the call of the wild, the bird cry of the frozen acres, the gal who kids the face off the barroom floor."

In January, 1936, it opened to fine business and got a good press. "The Mae West opus now playing at the Paramount, is doing a thriving business. So excited is the populace about the curvaceous lady and her torrid adventures as a missionary in Alaska that the picture is being held over for an additional week."

This has always been my favorite kind of reading matter.

My playing a missionary upset the late William Randolph Hearst, whose public policy in his newspapers was always for moral values for the masses. He wrote editorially, "Is it not time Congress did something about Mae West?" The nearest Congress came to that was almost naming twin lakes, round ones, after me in a national park; but a few people were against it.

I was asked, "Why do you always pick controversial subjects for your plays and pictures?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"First it was sex, and now religion and sex."

"All I have ever wanted to do is entertain people, make them laugh so hard they forget they'd like to cry."

Some of the dialogue I wrote for the film was soon being

quoted: "Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before."

"Give a man a free hand and he'll try to put it all over you."

As Sister Annie in the mission, I said: "Now I want two one-armed men to pass the plate. They don't have to be honest—just one-armed."

I had three good songs written for the picture by Gene Austin and Jimmie Johnson. "I'm an Occidental Woman in an Oriental Mood for Love," "Little Bar Butterfly" and "Mr. Deep Blue Sea."

The Internal Revenue Department got through tabulating the year's upper bracket. I made a list more exclusive than the Union League Club or people who had been kissed by Calvin Coolidge.

The highest salaried actress in Hollywood, Mae West, has made more than a million dollars since she came to Hollywood in 1932. By 1935, her annual salary was \$480,833. Only one person in the U. S. (W. R. Hearst, \$500,000) received a bigger salary. U. S. Presidents get \$75,000 a year.

No wonder Mr. Hearst and his high clean living moral values was writing editorials against me. He hated to see a woman in his class. I didn't hold it against him.

With this kind of income I was even paying for my own jewels—sometimes. I have always felt a gift diamond shines better than one you buy for yourself.

I got to meet the diamond dealers. Freeman Bernstein was known as the Jade King. My agents phoned me one day at my Ravenswood apartment in Hollywood. "Mae, Mr. Bernstein was formerly a theatre owner in the east. He says you played in some of his theatres as a child actress. He's now living in the same building you are, and would like to come up and say hello."

"Tell him to come up and see me sometime."

I made an afternoon appointment. Freeman Bernstein appeared at my apartment, accompanied by his black Sealyham

dog, Benny. He had a sandpaper voice, and a ludicrous habit of repeating words and phrases.

"I'm known as the Jade King—the Jade King," he told me, "and I have heard you are interested in precious stones—precious stones like star sapphires—star sapphires."

I admitted that I was, and asked if he had any.

He explained that he made frequent trips to China and other jaded parts of the world, and had brought back lots of jade; but that he did not know much about sapphires. They weren't his racket—his racket.

Nevertheless he unwrapped about sixty star sapphires, a few star rubies, and some other stones.

"If you see anything here you want," he said, "I'll make you a good price. A bargain price, I mean."

Benny gave him what I interpreted as a skeptical look, and rolled over on the floor.

About half the sapphires were a good cornflower blue; the rest were milky, with off-center stars. He quoted me a price per carat for any or all of them; also on the star rubies, which I said I would buy, since they were very good stones.

Then he held up a stone like a diamond, which I instantly recognized as only a zircon, worth maybe sixty-five dollars at the most. This he offered me for ten thousand dollars.

"Anyone else, fifteen. You could sell it any time for a profit of five thousand," he said.

I picked up the almost worthless zircon and let it shimmy in the sunlight. For a fast five grand I would have shimmied for him myself. "I think I'll buy this for my sister," I said.

Freeman Bernstein's face pleated with pleasure.

Then I turned back to the sapphires, which I weighed on my own jeweler's scales. I put the white ones aside, and made out a check for the blue ones and the rubies at the price he had quoted. Those were a good buy. I wanted to give them to my directors,

producer, executives at Paramount, and the banker who took care of my investments.

"Aren't you gonna take the white ones?" Bernstein asked excitedly. "Everyone likes them the best—the best."

"Then you should have no trouble selling them," I assured him.

His face dropped. I had got the best for the price of the worst.

I picked up the zircon again. "Let me have this till tomorrow. If my sister likes it, I'll buy it."

Relief spread over his face. He offered to wait until I decided about the zircon, and then take only one check for the entire transaction.

"Do you ever get any diamonds?" I asked Bernstein. "I'd like one of about thirty carats." I made a circle the size of a nickel with my thumb and forefinger.

Benny sat down on his haunches, gave a low moan, and threw himself on his back.

"What's the matter with Benny?" I asked. "Don't you treat him right?"

"Who, Benny? Treat him right? Why, we're pals, ain't we, Benny? I treat him the best—the best. I feed him lamb chops and everything."

"Maybe you'd better start feeding him steaks," I suggested.

When Bernstein returned the next evening, I had my maid give him back the zircon. I refused to see him.

Later I learned that after Bernstein had sold his theaters, he became a card-sharp on trans-ocean liners, and also one of the slickest of jewel smugglers.

"His dog Benny," I was told, "swallows the stones, and gets them past the customs inside him. Then Bernstein makes sure he gets them back from Benny."

At last I understood Benny's anguish when he heard me ask for a thirty-carat diamond.

Not long afterward screaming newspaper headlines announced

that Hitler had been swindled out of two million dollars by an American. Beneath was an unmistakable photograph of the sand-paper-voiced Freeman Bernstein.

By pulling this one on Schicklgruber, Bernstein made up, perhaps, for many of his other shady deals. At least, I came off better than Der Fuehrer.



Every Day's a Holiday



I USUALLY get along with talented men; I respect ability in any field. But some Hollywood geniuses annoyed me. Ernst Lubitsch, the European producer-director, who had built a reputation in this country for his famous "Lubitsch touch" and the producing of daring tongue-in-cheek films, became production chief at Paramount Studios. He was in some ways a gifted man, but in the opinion of many, arrogant, narrow and already slipping. We didn't see eye to eye about many things. Possibly that large black cigar he always had in his mouth helped to obscure our vision.

Lubitsch had control over all the studio's productions and Paramount didn't seem like home to me any longer. I decided to sign a contract with Emanuel Cohen, who had formed Major Pictures Corporation to produce pictures for Paramount release.

"Mae," he said, "I've bought the Broadway stage hit *Personal Appearance*, by Lawrence Riley. It's for your next picture. We think it will make a great vehicle for you if adapted to suit your particular personality."

So I wrote a screenplay based on the play, preserving what I could, and making changes and adding the dialogue the public

had come to expect from me. The down-on-the-farm sequences on a location that looked eastern were shot not too far from Los Angeles, near Corona, California. "A tree is a tree—a rock is a rock" was an old studio motto.

I played a movie star on tour, who meets a handsome farmer. It was decided the original title *Personal Appearance* might be too confusing to simple people, perhaps conveying the idea that Mae West was appearing in person, rather than in a picture. The picture was finally called *Go West, Young Man*, and went into general release in 1937.

Meanwhile I was wondering about returning to the stage. I wanted live people to play to again. I was getting the full treatment by the film censors. I had made a remark that was widely quoted: "When I'm good, I'm very, very good, but when I'm bad I'm better."

Emanuel Cohen had a new script ready for me, but I didn't like it. Neither did they.

I said, "I have a script based on the life of Catherine the Great of Russia. I would like to do it next."

Mr. Cohen said, "A great idea. I would make the picture but for one reason; the scenery for the script we don't like is already built. One set in particular is a doll, Mae—an authentic replica of Rector's famous restaurant in New York City at the turn of the century. Very costly."

"I want Catherine."

"Now, Mae, the Catherine story would be a very expensive picture to make and it would mean all new Russian sets, and they would take time to build. We'll get a new story in the same period as the sets already built—the Gay Nineties. I really have something to worry about, Mae—the cameraman and his crew are on salary, the director is on salary. At least, hear some songs. This Sam Coslow is a crackerjack song writing fellow."

I said I'd hear some songs, so Sam Coslow was sent for. There was a piano in the office, and Sam played a few numbers that

sounded rather good. He played a song called "Mademoiselle Fifi," a simple little song about a girl from Tenth Avenue in New York City, who went to Paris to learn to speak French and came back to America as a French *chanteuse*. There wasn't much enthusiasm from Mr. Cohen or the director, Mr. Sutherland, about this Fifi song.

"I think we can take this song."

Mr. Cohen said, "The other songs are much better."

I said, "Maybe. But this song I like."

"All right, if you like it."

After Sam Coslow left, I said, "I've got the new story line."

Emanuel Cohen gave me a quick worried look. "You what, Mae?"

"A story for your damned sets."

When Sam Coslow was playing the chorus of "Mademoiselle Fifi," the entire story came to me, right from the beginning to the end. The fake French girl from Tenth Avenue. I told Emanuel Cohen and Eddie Sutherland to remember every word of the story I was going to tell them, because I might forget what I said. They didn't want to trust to memory either, so they called in a stenographer to take it down in shorthand.

In about an hour and a half I dictated the story line, with plot and incidents, and introduced the main and minor characters. Later we called it *Every Day's a Holiday*.

In my part as Peaches O'Day, who, after selling the Brooklyn Bridge once too often, became Mademoiselle Fifi, I used a black wig. Somehow I had always wanted to have dark hair. "Peaches" was what the boys back in Brooklyn used to call me when I was a kid.

We lined up a wonderful cast, among whom were Charles Butterworth, Walter Catlett, Chester Conklin, Edmund Lowe, Lloyd Nolan, Charles Winninger, and Louis Armstrong and his band. We kept it clean as well as funny, as the following extracts should prove:

CATLETT. Why, you're the kind of woman that's got to be handled with kid gloves.

WEST. Yeah! Kid gloves, furs, clothes, and a couple of diamond necklaces thrown in.

BUTTERWORTH. What do you think of Inspector Quade?

WEST. Mmm, that's a guy so crooked he uses a corkscrew for a ruler.

WINNINGER. Now tell me, Miss Peaches, do you keep a diary?

WEST. I always say, keep a diary and some day it'll keep you.

BUTTERWORTH. You know, you've been arrested twenty-five times in the last six months.

WEST. Well, no woman's perfect.

CATLETT. How do you know McCarey will make a good mayor?

WEST. That's one guy you can't go wrong with. I found that out.

The Hays Office notified us they would give the picture a "B" (for adults only) clearance. "But we will give it an "A" (for general audience) if two lines are cut out. They are, "I wouldn't even lift my veil for that guy" and "I wouldn't let him touch me with a ten-foot pole."

I said, "They seem harmless lines to me."

Mr. Cohen sighed. "All these kids we're losing if we don't cut."

"What's wrong with the lines?" I asked.

"And all these kids growing up and not seeing a Mae West picture!"

So naturally I cut out the two offending lines and said: "I'd hate to have Mr. Hays' mind on a good low morning."

The emphasis seemed to be that I had "come clean" in this picture. The late Frederick C. Othman of United Press said: "The best Miss West has made. Not a single off-color line or situation; scrupulously clean, yet funny."

"*Every Day's a Holiday* is a better picture than *She Done Him Wrong*—and clean. Which should make it a hit all around," said columnist Sheilah Graham, who was busy just then trying to sober up her fallen down drunken lover F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Every one connected with the picture was highly nervous as

to the reception it would receive, since just before the picture was previewed on December 18, 1937, I had caused a situation of national shock not to be matched till we dropped our first atomic bomb. I was to appear as guest star on the Edgar Bergen-Charlie McCarthy radio program on a Sunday broadcast over the entire NBC network, originating from Station KFI, Los Angeles, at 5:00 P.M.

The news that at last I would be on the air caused considerable alterations to be made in the routines of many organizations operating that Sunday. Some workers demanded and got the hour off to hear the program; others worked in shifts throughout it. Restaurants, bars, drugstores advertised that the broadcast could be heard in them. Church services at that hour were postponed or canceled. Even vespers at a Roman Catholic college surrendered when it was learned why only two hundred students of the seventeen hundred enrolled showed up at chapel. If I had known any of this was going on, I would have refused to do the broadcast. Sunday is a day, if not for church, then at least for dignity.

I was perfectly innocent of the national furor; at least I did nothing I didn't do on stage or screen.

The trouble wasn't caused by the portion of the program in which I traded wisecracks with the bundle of splinters called Charlie McCarthy. It was the "Adam and Eve" sketch, with me as Eve and Don Ameche as Adam. The sketch had been written by Arch Oboler, a veteran radio writer, who usually did science-fiction fantasy, and it had been played once before on radio. The sketch had been approved by the radio people and their usual vice-presidents, as all material must be before it is permitted to be broadcast to an innocent America. I had scarcely had time to read over the sketch before the broadcast rehearsal. I had received the entire script the day before, and I had concentrated on the give and take gags with Charlie and Edgar.

The "Adam and Eve" sketch was an amusing satirical treatment of the ancient Garden of Eden story. There was nothing offensive in the dialogue or it would never have got on the air in the first place. I only gave the lines my characteristic delivery. What else could I do? I wasn't Aimee Semple McPherson. Or Lincoln at Gettysburg, or John Foster Dulles, or even Eleanor Roosevelt. I was Mae West. Sunday on radio doesn't alter one's personality.

I read Eve's inoffensive lines and my voice naturally smoldered a bit. My voice, I suppose, came over the air waves a little sultry and seductively—as I polished the famous apple for Don "Adam" Ameche. I had a frightening effect on certain pious and weak radio listeners.

"I wonder," said Jim, "why these poor tormented souls, when they first detected 'sin' in your voice, Mae, didn't immediately switch off their sets." He suspected that their enjoyment of my sinfulness left them with such a paralyzing sense of guilt they were only able to slough it off by hurling protests at NBC. Which they did.

The radio people had egg on their faces and their copies of the King James version. To pacify some pious frauds among the radio audience, I was *persona non grata* on radio until the heat was off. I must have produced a lot of heat on that broadcast; it took several years to cool off. And all I had done was ask Adam, "Would you, honey, like to try this apple sometime?"

One reviewer wrote, "Whatever happened on that radio program, Miss West in her new film is definitely on the side of the angels. She is, in fact, an anti-vice crusader. Of course she carries a pair of dice and a set of brass knuckles in her handbag."

The world was beginning to fall apart in 1938. Hitler was soon to be at war with the world. The horrors of political murder and

concentration camps made headlines. But people wanted entertainment more than ever before to take their minds off the coming troubles.

With *Every Day's a Holiday* off to a good start, I went on a personal appearance tour, opening with a week at the Paramount in Los Angeles. I was immediately booked for ten weeks to appear in person with the picture if the playing dates coincided. Sometimes my picture had already played the theatre before I got there. Either way, I continued to set up box-office records from coast to coast while I again enjoyed playing to a living audience. When I arrived in New York City there were ten thousand people there to meet me at the station.

I was tired of the success of my films. I wanted something more novel as to theme and character. Catherine the Great? It was almost five years since the Marlene Dietrich film version of the Russian Empress had proved an arty disaster. I had an altogether different version of her in mind. Not the hollow-checked doll portrayed in the Von Sternberg film. I saw the Empress as a warm, gay, very sensual woman, and yet a monarch who was a skillful politician and master statesman.

After my years of surviving studio politics and handling vice-presidents, I saw Catherine was really a portrait of myself. The life and loves of Catherine the Great. This, I felt, would be the most dramatic role I had yet done in pictures. What could I do with this off-beat characterization? I decided if I could show the studio a complete shooting script, they would grasp what Mae West as the exotic Russian Empress could mean to an audience.

I hunted out my files on the material I had worked over in the past years. The next four months I spent in research and writing the screenplay about the Great Catherine. I had to take certain liberties, but I didn't think Catherine would mind. She had taken a lot of liberties herself.

My job, as I saw it, was to take the highlights of thirty years of the Empress' reign and compress them into a few years, dating

from her seizing the throne. I had to juggle dates, but the historical events were not invented. History, I found out, is almost anything that can happen—and most of our great heroes created more than they could use. Catherine herself I frankly characterized as a *pre-incarnation* of myself. A Slavic-Germanic Diamond Lil, just as low in vivid sexuality, but on a higher plane of authority. I felt I knew myself and my roles best. So I saw Catherine in modern terms.

Catherine was credited by most historians with three hundred lovers. I had to make out with only fourteen in the limitations of my screen story. However, I hinted that her whole Guards Regiment was interested, and she in them. I had to be delicate about this; the Hays Office certainly would insist that on the screen Catherine do nothing visual to make her appear vulgarly promiscuous.

I, however, always found it a good policy to slip a few items into a script that the censors would cut out. It gave them a sense of accomplishing their job and they were also less likely to cut out the things I really wanted to keep in.

By September of 1938, I had finished a shooting script. My manager, Jim Timony liked the idea and had for years.

"Mae, they'd be crazy if they turned this down."

I showed my Catherine script to the studio. The studio had been showering me with their scripts. I hadn't liked any of them; they were the usual banal studio dreamboats. They liked mine all right. "*But*, Mae dear, we don't want to do another story about Catherine the Great. And Ernst Lubitsch didn't like it."

"What makes him such an expert on Catherine?"

"He's a European. So was she."

"I never heard anything more foolish," I said. "I am determined to make this picture, even if I have to do it independently."

The studio heads smiled. Later, while I was playing in my stage production *CATHERINE WAS GREAT*, Lubitsch made a picture of his own version of Catherine starring Tallulah Bankhead; he wanted to prevent my making a picture of my story by getting

his to the screen first. Although Miss Bankhead gave a good performance, as she always does, still the picture didn't do well. It played the smaller drive-ins.

Jim thought independent production was a possibility worth exploring. He put some copies of my screenplay in his traveling bag and went north to see Mr. Louis Lurie, a San Francisco financier. Mr. Lurie was a man of shrewd and profitable investments, some of which were in the motion picture business. Being outside the film industry, he saw realistically and thought boldly without the help of yesmen. Jim wired: WE ARE IN BUSINESS.

The Mae West-Empire Pictures Corporation resulted from Jim's preliminary talks with Louis Lurie, and later discussions I had with him when he came down to Hollywood. I was impatient to get to playing Catherine the Great. But corporations and film productions take time.

Jim said, "These things aren't done overnight, Mae. They take weeks, and months. Let the agency book you for a series of personal appearances beginning in New York. Say, at Loew's State Theatre."

It was a fine successful tour, but I could hardly wait to get back and start rolling with *CATHERINE*.

Jim said, "The banks are not ready yet—and studio space is hard to get."

"I'm disappointed Catherine hasn't progressed while I was away. So things are at a standstill?"

"Times are all crazy."

I knew the world was burning on the edges as 1939 printed itself on history. Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, was running about nervously with a rolled-up umbrella, and Adolf Hitler was stamping his feet and chewing rugs (so they said) in the German chancellery in Berlin. To show-people he was a ham actor and a talented local murderer. But he kept us all off balance.



Cowboys and Indians



THE COMPULSION to progress, without knowing where or exactly how I was to do so, bothered me. From now on I knew that I could trust myself only to material that would be "great" for my personality, though not necessarily great in a literary sense.

Whatever I did next would have to top my previous success. In the spring of 1938 I began a search for an idea or for material that would help me do so.

Personal appearances in connection with *Every Day's a Holiday*, and a tour booked by the William Morris Agency, did not interrupt that search. Wherever I appeared, mobs of fans demanded how soon I would make another picture. I put them off by saying, "As soon as I get back to Hollywood," but I was not sure myself.

While Chamberlain talked "peace in our time," Universal Pictures approached me with an offer to make a motion picture with W. C. Fields. It was a daring concept and a mad one, but the times were mad. A studio boss explained to me: "We have in mind with your combined comedy talents you two would tear audiences apart."

"Laughing, I hope," I said.

"We also have in mind we should do this as a comedy horse opera."

I asked, expressionless, "Whom do you have in mind for the horse?"

"This ain't to be a fantasy, Miss West."

I explained, "I was joking. I just intended to make sure no four-legged animal was going to grab top billing."

"Mr. Fields is a remarkable fella."

"I always enjoy his brand of comedy. There is no one else quite like Bill. And it would be snide of me to add, 'Thank God.' A great performer. My only doubts about him come in bottles."

"Under control. He's almost a tea-hound now."

"I never like to work with actors who drink on the job. They aren't dependable as a rule, and you can't tell when, inspired by some daffy alcoholic whim, they can ruin your performance."

"You'll see. Bill is on light wine and beer."

"Being a non-drinker myself, I'm sensitive to liquor fumes, especially when breathed over me at close range."

"He's in training for the part. It's a rugged, outdoor, manly role."

"I can't see Bill Fields as a two-gun man, but his dexterity as a two-bottle man is common knowledge. He is proud of it."

"He'll promise anything to work with you."

"He'll shudder with horror when I make it part of my agreement to do the picture that he lay off all alcohol while we are shooting."

"Not even a small beer?" Bill Fields was said to have whimpered as he signed.

Fields was a remarkable, difficult talent. A fine comic writer, a miser who had two hundred bank accounts under fictitious names all over the world—and a hater of dogs and children and civilization.

Bill's doctors had been after him to taper down to a quart or so

a day. Realizing that his system must require some splashing ointment to keep away the shakes, I knew he would have difficulty staying on the wagon.

Eddie Cline, the director, a graduate of the Mack Sennett school of comedy, assigned members of the staff to keep a sharp watch that Bill didn't do any nipping between scenes. But Bill devised various stratagems to have his liquids handy, bringing it in disguised as a "Coke," done up in a parcel, wrapped in a napkin—anything that would prevent an accidental gleam of a bottle catching my eye. Once he complained, "Someone has stolen the cork out of my lunch!"

Ready to begin a day's shooting, I saw that Bill Fields was entertaining a large crowd of extras. He was in great form, and they were howling at him. Something told me that Bill was over-stimulated. The assistant director confirmed my suspicions. "I'm afraid Bill has slipped off the wagon this morning. He's telling the kid actors to go out and play in the traffic."

Another sign of Bill's condition was his comment on a hook-and-ladder fire engine on its way past the studio to fight a nearby fire. "Damn drunken house-painters."

I asked the director if there were scenes we could shoot without Fields. Eddie Cline checked the script and found there were.

"All right," I said, "pour him out of here."

The assistant director went over to Fields. "Bill, you can go home. We won't need you until tomorrow morning."

"Oh, ya-as?" His puffed, bloodshot eyes gave me a side glance. "Ya-as," he said again with an old-world courtesy, tipping his hat to me. And he walked out with a sheepish look.

Fields was brilliant and erratic in public as well as on the set. He once walked into a bank and grabbed a child in a cowboy suit, shouting, "A midget bank robber!"

Naturally, from the first, we had story problems. The studio had their story ideas, Fields had his story ideas, and I had mine.

Bill and I had one thing in common: both of us disliked the studio's story. It was called *The Jayhawkers*, and amounted to little more than a formula western with jokes added.

Fields wrote me alarming letters. "I take, my dear, a very dim view of the studio's mental equipment, to put it mildly. It is up to us to take matters in our own firm hands concerning this dismal story. If we leave it up to the studio they will ruin us. Yes, ruin us. I say it again, ruin us."

I wrote a story of my own, which I gave the working title, *The Lady and the Bandit*.

We had more conferences at the studio. Everybody spoke his piece, Bill Fields and I speaking big pieces. Bill said, "And my last argument is we do Miss West's story or we do nothing."

So I wrote the screenplay, which became *My Little Chickadee*.

I did my very best to make Bill Fields' scenes as funny as possible. He was pleased with most of them, though he insisted on putting in some of his fine characteristic touches, which was no more than I would have done in his place—and have done in other times and places.

Once on the set, I thought of a line and a piece of business I hoped would be a tremendous laugh. I felt that Eddie Cline, the director, had a great comedy sense, maybe because he usually agreed with me.

"It's a wow, Bill—a buster."

When I turned to Bill Fields I was shocked to see his reaction. The big red-nosed man was so upset that he was shaking. From the look on his face I thought he was going to cry. Obviously, he didn't want me to get that big laugh. I realized he felt I was a little too fast for him.

"All right, Bill," I said, "if you don't want it in, I won't do it."

I think that under the grotesque ruin of a clown Bill Fields was tragically aware of the wreck he had made of himself.

While *My Little Chickadee* was still in work, Dr. Frank N.

Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Movement, came to Hollywood to put on a huge Moral Re-Armament rally in the Hollywood Bowl. The philosophy of Moral Re-Armament—"Love Everything"—was catching on all over the world except in Germany. Dr. Buchman, a pretty good salesman, came up to see me at my apartment, to interest me in the gospel of the M.R.A. "To enlist, Miss West, your support of the movement."

"My own movement doesn't need any re-arming, Doc, but I am glad to help out the cause. I just happen to have a couple of press boys and photographers on hand. So let's take some pictures."

We did, under an oil painting for which I had posed of a reclining nude.

"I agree, Doc, that M.R.A. is a good thing, and a naughty world could use a lot of it. Have you met Bill Fields yet? Splendid raw material for you."

"No," he said, "but I'd love to meet him."

"You should," I said. "Moral re-armament is just what he needs. If you reform Bill, I'll let him win me body and soul in the picture. Give him your message. He'll go for it if you can put it into a bottle."

Dr. Buchman, good salesman as he was, failed with Bill Fields. "I'll take anything in a bottle," Bill said, "but I don't need re-armament. Just a stimulant. Besides, Herr Doktor, I believe in doing unto others as they do unto you—but I do it first. Care for a fruit juice cocktail—just a smidgin of gin?"

While working in the picture, I received a less philosophical visit than Dr. Buchman's. Ralph Capone and another brother of Al, the notorious "Little Caesar" of Chicago's rackets during the prohibition era, dropped by the studio "just to say hello." I had met all the Capones ten years before, when I first played *DIAMOND LIL* in Chicago. They had become ardent fans of mine. The Capone boys were rough and simple. Direct, too, and one

had to be wary not to rile their primitive minds. Men of action—Dr. Buchman could have used them—they were vital.

Ralph said to me, "We are just passing through Los Angeles on our way to visit Al. He is in the new Federal prison at San Pedro. He's been transferred there from Alcatraz, where he's serving a twelve-year Federal rap Uncle Whiskers hung on him."

"So I heard," I said.

"For income tax evasion. Pretty sneaky, eh?"

I shook their hands. "Give Al my regards."

"Don't think we won't."

But Al Capone was small time in 1939. On September 1, Germany invaded Poland, and two days later England and France declared war on Germany.

Bill Fields said, "It's a fink world."

Closer to home in Los Angeles, state and county officials raided three gambling ships off Santa Monica Bay, where racket boy Tony Cornero held out aboard the *Rex* for a few days. He finally bowed to a court decision and surrendered the *Rex*, as an enemy warship.

The Townsend Old Age Pension Plan was knocked out in a test vote in the House. Old actors, hopeful for a weekly payoff, wept.

The sky over Los Angeles also wept, giving us 5.42 inches of rain in nineteen hours, after several days of record-breaking September heat, with a temperature of 107.2 degrees. Jim said, "Mae, you're still the hottest thing in town."

War came to the Hollywood studios. The motion picture industry had signed closed shop agreements with the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, and was faced with a strike, but the producers averted this by granting a 10 per cent wage increase.

Gangsterism in local labor unions had a strong leader. I remember Willie Bioff, the film union leader, a known shakedown

artist, who held a pistol to the heads of the producers. He was wanted by police on an old Chicago warrant for pandering. They finally caught Willie and got him in a witness chair, and he sang like an off-key canary. This made a lot of trouble for "The Boys." They were very patient for a while. Then, much later, somebody attached an explosive charge to the ignition of his car. Exit Willie, not laughing.

We finally finished *My Little Chickadee*. One of the accepted gags I wrote in for Bill Fields was when Fields' Indian valet, Clarence, referring to me, asked, "Big Chief gottum new squaw?" Fields answered, "Ya-as, brand new. I haven't even unwrapped her yet."

Fields played the role of Cuthbert J. Twillie, an itinerant snake-oil salesman and card-sharp, trapped into a fake marriage with Flower Belle (me), who has been run out of a western frontier town and told not to come back until she is "respectable and married." On their "wedding night" Twillie begins to pet his bed-fellow. "Are you wearing your caracule coat, my plum?" he asks. Then to his horror he discovers that Flower Belle has skipped and left a tied-up goat in her place under the covers.

To show her willingness to reform and cooperate in the community life of Greasewood City, Flower Belle takes over for the sick schoolmarm. Entering the classroom, she finds written on the blackboard: "I am a good boy. I am a good man. I am a good girl."

"What is this?" she queries. "Propaganda?"

The law catches up with Twillie, and he is about to be strung up. Asked if he has any last request, he says: "Ya-as, I'd like to see Paris before I die."

Through Flower Belle's stratagems, however, Twillie's innocence is proved, and he is spared; but he realizes he has no further place in Flower Belle's life. When he takes his leave, he invites her to "come up and see me sometime." Flower Belle, adopting

his gravelly tones, says from the side of her mouth: "Ya-as, my little chickadee." As she mounts the stairs, "THE END" appears across her expressive posterior.

Over the years *My Little Chickadee* has been shown over and over again. Untold millions have seen it.

But Catherine the Great got no nearer to the cameras, so I concentrated on my personal life—my men. Romance is a difficult thing to transpose from real life to paper—and only to the active partners does it have a special flavor.

At this time, my love life was mainly casual. I had no time for deep attachments, but I always managed to fit romance into a busy schedule.

These affairs were furious while they lasted. I want them to know they were all remarkably charming. Perhaps I did tell them at the time. One always should. Only one or two of them got angry when I said it had been fine knowing them. They knew a good thing when they had it. They hated to leave it. I suppose I was cruel, but also I felt I was moral in breaking clean with no untidy emotional linen showing.

Like I always say, it's not the men you see me with, it's the men you don't see me with.

The successful release of *My Little Chickadee* brought an avalanche of fan mail. Irving Hoffman noted in *The Hollywood Reporter*: "In Disney's *Pinocchio* the character of Cleo the Goldfish was fashioned after Mae West's buxom figure." Soon RAF pilots in the great air battles of the Battle of Britain would name their inflatable chest life preservers "Mae Wests"—so by proxy I was there in England's greatest hour.

We temporarily shelved Catherine the Great; I wanted to do it in Technicolor, and we found that such a production would cost millions. Jim explained, "With the foreign markets cut off by war in Europe, and with Russia's very unpopular attack on

little Finland, the risk is too great to do a Russian background picture."

"The subject will be just as good at a better time. Catherine, the royal sex-boat, will have her day, Jim. I promise myself that."

I was still making news in England—this time in classical Latin. "*Quamobrem non ascendis nos videre aliquando, ut ait Maia Occidentalis?*" began a news story. "In case you have forgotten your Latin, the translation is: 'Why don't you come up and see us sometime,' the classic words of Mae West. British Cabinet Minister Ramsley (Commissioner of Works) received this invitation from the Press Gallery in the House of Commons, after many a less unconventional complaint about bad acoustics had remained unheeded. . . . The Mae West invitation forthwith prompted the Minister to spend an afternoon up in the Press Gallery, and having convinced himself of the complaint's justification, he promised relief in the form of amplification instruments."



There Must Be Something More



IN 1941 my contribution to the Battle of Britain[†] became official; I landed in the standard English language dictionary: "MAE WEST. Life-saving jackets so named by pilots of the British R.A.F., who had the task of defending England against the bombing attacks of the German Luftwaffe in World War II."

I got a letter informing me that the Royal Air Force's life-saving jackets had been named after me. I was delighted with this new tribute to my sex appeal in practical form. Back in 1933-1934 I had been called "the life-saver of the motion picture industry," and now—the double jackpot. I replied:

Dear Boys of the R.A.F.:

I have just seen that the R.A.F. flyers have a life-saving jacket they call a "Mae West" because it bulges in all the "right places." Well, I consider it a swell honor to have such great guys wrapped up in me, know what I mean?

Yes, it's kind of a nice thought to be flying all over with brave men, even if I'm only there by proxy in the form of a life-saving jacket, or a life-saving jacket in my form.

In the dictionary, how will they describe me? As an aviator's

jacket that supplies the woman's touch while the boys are flying around nights?

I've been in *Who's Who*, and I know what's what, but it'll be the first time I ever made the dictionary.

Sin-sationally,
Mae West

Mae Wests are now used by our own armed forces, and are standard equipment on trans-ocean airlines. When I toured both here and in England, servicemen often turned up to tell me how in some crisis of their war experience their Mae Wests saved their lives.

After the release of *My Little Chickadee*, I had to face again the increasingly difficult problem of deciding on what type of picture I would do next. The conditions of the times made my Catherine the Great story inopportune. Unfortunately, it was, to my mind, the only story around that would make a good vehicle for me. Most of the others seemed bland and trivial.

Universal wanted me to do another picture for them and Columbia also talked picture to me. But we couldn't get together on a story. In the middle of 1941 I was still without a story that the studios and I could agree on, until the yarn by Myron Fagan, who had written a number of successful Broadway plays, turned up about a private detective who was a woman. This I liked and decided to write a screenplay to fit.

I wrote a part for John Barrymore, and I had Jim approach him about it. In his youth, John had been a sort of male Mae West in his private life. He was enthusiastic over my offer and said he'd be ready to do the picture whenever I was.

I began working on the story in earnest. One night I was invited to the opening of John Murray Anderson's "Silver Screen Revue" at the Wilshire Bowl. John Barrymore came over to my table. John leaned over my shoulder and, looking down the front

of my gown, whispered in my ear, "*When* are we going to make that ——— picture together?"

A photographer's flashbulb went off, and the resulting candid picture was published in the next day's newspapers.

Neither John Barrymore nor I ever did that picture. I couldn't make the kind of studio deal I wanted.

Salvador Dali, the Spanish painter, designed a sofa of red silk made from enlarged photographs of my lips. It was amusing, but not very practical. Dali had a great flair for publicity.

In the early fall of 1941 something happened that had a profound effect upon my life and thinking.

I had become satiated with success. I had made a great name for myself. I was world-famous. There were no material things I could not reach. I was bored, and I had reached a point where I began to feel that I would either live a very wicked life, or develop spiritually. I was indeed at a point where I had to make up my mind to go either way.

I began asking myself questions. What if there is a hereafter? If there is, will I be held to account for what I do with my life? If not, it doesn't matter much what I do except what I want to do. Is there any proof of immortality?

I decided to give myself six months to find some satisfactory proof of life after death, if there is such proof. I had not paid much attention to organized religion, though I respected it in others, and I was always willing to help good causes and charities.

Because of the life I led I have often been aware of the closeness of good and evil imbedded in man. I had certain moral values, not the often hypocritical moral values of society, but the moral standards of decency as I saw them, obligations to law and order. And my major rule of conduct was to not let my emotional life harm anyone in any way.

I believed that we are more than animals and our behavior must

have brakes, restraints, certain values that some people label honor, truth, pride, order, and respect.

I didn't like too vague or fancy labels. I didn't trust abstract answers that there would be final judgment or pie in the sky by and by. This was the only world I saw and lived in, and if this was the only life I had, I wanted to live it to the hilt. I had plenty of smooth, pious answers given me, but none were proven. Blind faith is a great thing for saints, but not for a thinking human being who is aware of the jungle beneath the floor of our society.

It was not that I was jaded, it was only that I had no answers to serious things.

I would begin by searching for the greater hope of all of humanity; a search for God and survival after death in His mercy. I state all this the best I know how, in the language I have available to me, and I record it honestly.

Accompanied by my manager, I had often visited churches in various cities for quiet moments. Mostly these were Catholic because that was what Jim was, and what my father had been. I myself was brought up a Protestant, but I had seldom gone to Sunday School. It gave me headaches.

I found these visits restful and inspirational. Now I began talking to those guides of ritual who presumably knew about life after death—ministers, priests, rabbis and yogis.

They had no real answers, and what each told me from the viewpoint of his particular faith signified for him sufficient proof of a hereafter. Perhaps they themselves were too highly dogmatized to get their message across to such a novice. I was not satisfied. I needed *tangible* proof. If anything existed, I meant to find out about it. The churchmen were certain about life after death, for the Bible, though not scientific history, spoke positively of eternal life. I had to be sure in my own mind and heart.

I picked up a Los Angeles newspaper and casually glanced through it. I never read newspapers, I skim them. Rapidly as I was turning the pages, my eye caught an announcement of a

spiritualist convention in downtown Los Angeles. Once I had attended private seances of small groups. My experiences led me to believe that what took place there was for squirrels. The world has been breeding more lunatics than it can consume.

I asked Jim to attend for me and report a meeting that a Reverend Thomas Jack Kelly of Buffalo was holding. Heavily blindfolded by six well-tied linen handkerchiefs, Mr. Kelly was demonstrating his powers of extrasensory perception, which I later found were being tested in the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University.

At the meeting, Mr. Kelly suddenly turned his blindfolded eyes in the direction of Jim, sitting in the second row with his friend, Joe Stanley, a fighter.

"I get the name of S———," said Mr. Kelly, rattling off a long and almost unpronounceable name sounding Russian or Polish. Joe Stanley whispered, "That's our real family name!" Jim was astonished; he had thought Joe was of Italian descent.

"The departed father of this man S——— is now here," Mr. Kelly said, "with a message for his son. He wants his son to know that he was killed—murdered—and his body thrown into the water *afterward*."

Joe said he always thought his father had drowned. After this report, I had to meet the Reverend Kelly myself. Jim arranged it. I invited a dozen friends and relatives, including my sister Beverly, to a seance in my apartment.

Mr. Kelly said, "I want to be securely and tightly blindfolded, so that there can be no suspicion of trickery when I single out persons for whom I might have messages."

He was an impressive, serious man, neither vivid nor a fanatic. His voices, or controls, said many things that impressed me. He also produced some predictions of the future. Time checked out some of the answers he gave me.

To my first question, "Will we be in the war?" Kelly's answer

was, "We will have a surprise attack on Honolulu within three months, by Japan."

"How long will the war last?" I asked.

"From five to six years." To this he added something I hadn't asked him. "President Roosevelt will not live out his *fourth* term."

"Will we win the war if we do get into it?"

Kelly replied, "Yes. America and England together will win the war."

Was he in contact with the future, or was he merely a good guesser? I had to find out, find out much more.

Usually he would give the answers quickly. Occasionally, when a question contained some complex wording, he would pause a moment as if listening. At such times I could hear a whispering of strange unworldly voices around him. Mr. Kelly had told us, "If at any time you hear voices around me, pay no attention to them." Mr. Kelly also said to some questions, "That's what 'they' tell me." Apparently "they" were the voices.

Afterwards I felt I had touched mystery, but had not solved it. I told myself that if I went into spiritualism I might become a queen of the other world rather than of the underworld. I was left dangling between the occult and the rackets.

Some time after the Reverend Jack Kelly returned to his home, and church, in Buffalo, New York, my sister Beverly had a man visitor from Brooklyn who had known our parents. Beverly did not know that the man was wanted in the east by the police, suspected of having vigorously used a hammer on his wife's head with fatal results.

The Los Angeles police found out this man's whereabouts and came to ask my cooperation in taking him into custody. I went with them to talk to Beverly. All she could tell them was that the suspect had left the day before, leaving no forwarding address. This stymied matters, as they had nothing more to go on.

I put in a phone call to the Reverend Jack Kelly at his home in

Buffalo. I do not know why I did this. Or what I really wanted to say about the suspect. But some supernatural suggestion made me do it. I started to tell him about the wanted man, and how my sister and I happened to be mixed up in the case.

The Reverend Kelly interrupted: "The man they're looking for, Miss West, was arrested twenty minutes ago."

I hung up open-mouthed, and told this to the detectives. They called downtown Los Angeles headquarters and inquired if there was any late report on the wanted man. The answer came back: "He was arrested in San Diego half an hour ago!"

I didn't see how this could be done with mirrors or stage tricks. Mr. Kelly had something, whatever it was or whatever world it came from.

The Reverend Jack Kelly and I became good friends. I know of other instances where he has been instrumental in helping the police of different cities clear up certain crimes. Kelly was born in Wales, where his father worked in the coal mines. Jack Kelly's powers of extrasensory perception began to appear when he was a very small boy. One day before he was eight years old he was visiting his father in the mine. Suddenly, little Jack turned to the man who was working with his father and bluntly blurted out in a child's callow way, "Mister Morgan, your wife just died."

His father was horrified, scolded Jack for saying such a terrible thing, and apologized for the boy to his friend. But the miner's wife had died, *at the very moment that young Jack Kelly had made the announcement.*

Other demonstrations of foreknowledge by the boy led Kelly senior to become interested in psychic phenomena, and he too discovered psychic abilities in himself that he successfully developed.

Jack Kelly left home at an early age, later serving in the British Army during World War I. He was badly wounded in France ten minutes after the Armistice had been declared. Afterwards, he came to America, then traveled all over the world, in-

cluding India and Tibet. For the past sixteen years, he had conducted a Universalist non-sectarian church in Buffalo, New York, from where he made trips to wherever his services were required.

There *was* something with greater power. Having seen what could be done through psychic powers, I wanted additional proof, if possible, by developing psychically myself, if there were some way that I could. I met a woman of recognized psychic ability who was a practitioner in Hollywood.

First of all, she taught me to meditate, not to concentrate mind and attention on one specific thing or idea, but to go "into the silence," blanking out consciousness, shutting out all thought, and letting the inner voice come through. It took me weeks, little by little, for short periods each day, to achieve the thorough black-out of all conscious thinking that real meditation is. I began to get encouraging results. I began to realize that in many ways I had been listening to an inner voice all my life. I know my story has suddenly taken a wild new path that no one has expected, but it was just as amazing to me. It certainly shocked me into making a closer study of myself and my motives.

This is the first time I have ever related any of this in public, and I do it now to show a facet of my life so far unknown. I have maintained a deep interest in metaphysics. At the present time our spiritual knowledge cannot supply all the answers about life after death, yet it offers to me the best intimations of immortality we have, and I hold on to it, waiting for more.

It can well be that those deep intuitions we sometimes have—those hunches that prove out, and those dreams that come true—are genuine examples of extrasensory perception. The Reverend Jack Kelly says, "They are, and we must pay heed to them. To listen to these inner voices when outside help or advice seems of little use may be the beginning of spiritual wisdom. To paraphrase: "What doth it profit a skeptic to close the eyes of his mind, and never see truth anywhere."

George Santayana, the poet-philosopher, expressed a similar thought in lovelier words:

It is not wisdom to be only wise
And on the inward vision close the eyes.
But it is wisdom to believe the heart. . . .

I got no loud ringing answers, but I have experienced enough of psychic phenomena to be convinced that there is some kind of a *hereafter*. We are far from all the truths, but I now believe in a God, a designer of things, and I believe that in time our earth-bound senses may be developed fully to apprehend the supernatural. He will let us know Him as He is, "in spirit and in truth."



Catherine Was Greater than Ever



IN 1942, I was brought down from heaven, and the voices, to the reality of a husband I had long forgotten. It was a hard bump. "A woman may owe a man a lovin', but not a livin'," I used to say. And I still agree with myself. The forgotten man, my husband in the eyes of God and law courts, Frank Wallace, sued me for \$1,000 a month separate maintenance, after waiting twenty-five years.

The first public disclosure of our marriage had been in 1935, when some municipal relief workers in Milwaukee were sorting over official records for removal elsewhere before the building in which they were kept was torn down. They discovered a record of my marriage to Frank Wallace in 1911. This was news, and the press of the nation built a fire under it as an exposé of "Mae West's Secret Husband."

I did my best to confuse the issue. I denied everything. "Never heard of the gentleman." "Never was in Milwaukee until last year." "Must have been some other girl with my name." "I've only been married to my career, and that's all."

Nobody, especially the newspapers and movie magazines, was

going to let it rest there. They checked and double-checked and dug around in the mystery. They wrote thousands of words, all of which made my current pictures bigger box-office than ever. But I'd have been happier if they had let sleeping marriage records lie. It gave my husband an idea for a future at my expense.

In 1936 Frank went into a New York court and secured a declaratory judgment that I was legally married to him. From then on I heard a lot about him. With a dancing partner, Frank did an act around the country, commercializing himself as "Mae West's Husband," and displaying my name all over his billing in a way that suggested I was appearing in person with him. I tried to put a stop to this constant irritation.

In September, 1941, the whole situation was revived again. It began to look as if it would have as many revivals as J. J. Shubert's *Blossom Time*. Frank brought suit for separate maintenance of \$1,000 a month alimony. The case was heard in San Bernardino, California, before Superior Judge Charles L. Allison.

After listening to all the text the plaintiff put out, Judge Allison looked sternly down from his bench. "There is no question," he said of Frank, "that the plaintiff in filing this action did not act in good faith. Nothing in this case has convinced me that he was not motivated by profit in filing such an action. Case dismissed."

The next July, Frank was back with another suit, for more of the same, plus a \$25,000 attorney's fee, \$2,500 for court costs, *and* a division of community property valued at \$1,000,000.

This time my attorney hit Frank Wallace with a cross-complaint in which I asked for a divorce. Not long afterward, I was awarded an interlocutory decree. Rumors had it that in the end I felt a little sorry for Frank and made him a settlement. He did get a few blue chips as a present from me.

Being a divorcee didn't change things much for me. My new freedom, a mere technicality, only served to warn me not to

marry in haste and be sued at leisure. I have never remarried.

With the major part of the year lost through ancient bed-and-board court actions, I had been in no state of mind to write any new material for myself. The scripts that were being submitted to me were worthless. I expected 1943 to deal me some new cards. Numerologically it came out "8," which is my lucky number.

One day of the new year, Gregory Ratoff, the actor-producer-director, came to my apartment with my agent, and after kissing my hand, clicking his heels, sighing like someone too full of food, talked about doing a "peecture" with me. It was to be called *Tropicana*, based on a successful Broadway musical. It sounded good and Ratoff has an accent that has an accent.

I said, "I'll be glad to do the picture if I think the final story line makes sense."

"Dollink, only sense and passion."

I waited for the story several weeks. Ratoff was on a picture at M-G-M and could not get started on *Tropicana*. Weeks went by and no word from him.

Finally, he came to my apartment again, and following a deep, shark-like kiss on my hand, he said, "Dollink, we can't make the story I told you, but the name *Tropicana* we'll make."

I watched him with narrowing eyes and suspicious thoughts as he explained that he had a new story line, one he thought better than the one I had contracted to do.

"Listen, dollink, for you the Czar can flog me, but it must be only great."

Of course, Russians can make any story sound good. When Gregory Ratoff directs a picture, I was told, the business of direction becomes a production in itself. Usually better than the picture. A separate film could be made of Ratoff directing and be released with the picture itself as a double feature. I was careful to listen to the story itself and not to his borscht and sour cream personality.

From a writer's standpoint, it was nothing but a hodgepodge

of banal situations, and I knew it would not be very good. When he finally got it to me on paper, it had a trite flatness. I tried to get a release from my commitment.

Meanwhile, "Hurry Up" Ratoff had spent a lot of money shooting musical numbers and was ready to shoot the main scenes with the principals. The foolish bank that had put up the money for production would not let him change the star because money had been loaned only on account of my name.

Ratoff pleaded in three languages: "I will be ruined if I have to give back the money and call off the picture. Besides, dollink, I have no money. A man got to live in style. I was raised in the Czar's own house."

"As what?"

There were chances, I saw, that bad publicity might get out. People might think I was getting too temperamental, and that I caused this fancy moujik's going into bankruptcy. Against my better judgment, I made the picture. I did manage to write the only good scenes for myself that I had in the picture, but there wasn't enough time to change the story and make it into a good picture.

Although advance exploitation used the title *Tropicana*, it fitted nothing in the picture but Xavier Cugat and his orchestra. It was released as *The Heat's On*. Along with mine, the fine talents of Victor Moore and Billy Gaxton were wasted on an inferior story. I sometimes wonder if Gregory didn't talk the Czar out of Russia.

After this dismal experience I made up my mind that I would never do another picture unless everything, but everything, was to my satisfaction, and so stipulated in black and white, without an accent.

I will never make a picture again just for the sake of making a picture. That also holds good for any other medium of entertainment in which I may appear. If I'm not convinced that what I

do is great entertainment, I would rather do nothing at all but sit home and polish my diamonds.

Besides, I wanted to get away a while from Hollywood. I had made a lot of films, and I was, I reminded myself, not only a screen star, but a stage star as well. Broadway was exciting during the war years. The whole world was battling bravely for its soul, but somehow, no matter how hard the war effort was, in Hollywood it all appeared like a musical comedy war at the studios; not one good realistic war film was made.

Even the men in uniform lived often in Beverly Hills and reported daily to Fort Roach, a film studio converted into the making of official films. Sixteen geniuses made a training film called *How to Bury Your Garbage*.

I got out my screenplay on Catherine the Great and decided to change it into a stage play and get out of town. The time seemed as good as it would ever be, for in 1944 we were allies with the Russians and they were being *tovarisch-tovarisch* with us. We were sending them billions of dollars worth of ships and planes and tanks and guns, and Joe Stalin was shouting for us to give him that Second Front. Washington could have given him mine, but I didn't like him. And when I don't like a man, I give him nothing.

The Shuberts, my dear friends, were ready to do a stage play with me. "Any time, Mae, you have one you want to do." I told them my plans on the phone about "Catherine," and Mr. Lee Shubert said, "Mike Todd will be coming out to Hollywood to talk to you about the play. A little crazy fella, but smart."

Mike Todd was already then a dynamic personality with tremendous nerve-tearing initiative and drive, who did things in a big, maddening way. He did not produce regularly season after season like some of the established producers. (He was broke a great deal of the time.) There would be years when there would be nothing from him at all while he promoted a bankroll.

When he did go into action, his press agents were sure to know about it, and tell the world. Mike was a tragic figure—half con man, half child, all showman. He never rested, never got his nervous system under control, and he ran all the time in all directions at once.

Mike made arrangements with me to produce my play, which I retitled *CATHERINE WAS GREAT*. In May I went to New York to cast the show. Like Catherine, who was always surrounded by the tallest and handsomest guardsmen in her empire, I wanted the tallest and handsomest actors with muscles available in New York. The call went out for personable actors six feet tall or over to play my Imperial Guards. Only big boys need apply was the idea, and the bigger the better.

Broadway had never seen so many skyscraping young giants as stooped to get through the stagedoor of the Hudson Theatre, where we were casting. Outside of the very tall guardsmen, the other men players varied in height from five-seven to six feet.

Mike Todd was a jumpy, careless cigar smoker. He came to rehearsals with a big Havana jutting out of his determined mouth. He wasn't aware of my strong allergy to the weed. When the news was tactfully broken to him, he switched to pipe-smoking, at least in my vicinity, and that I didn't mind. He ground down several teeth on hard pipe stems.

Hot weather came early that year in New York, and there was a press agent who insisted I was the cause of it. I would gladly have turned it off; it made rehearsals extra-tiring.

The director, Roy Hargrave, had a very difficult play to stage—many scenes and many people. Backstage was Robert Downing, one of the best stage managers, who handled the large cast with efficiency.

We had lavish Imperial Russian sets by Howard Bay, and fabulous costumes. The twelve scenes of the play required twenty-

nine stagehands to effect changes. It was a \$150,000 production, at that time an enormous amount for a non-musical show.

We opened in Philadelphia during melting weather, and though the Forrest Theatre there was air-conditioned, under the strong stage lights my heavily brocaded royal costumes, my headdresses and jewels made me earn my title to the Russian throne of 1762 the hard way. The imperial train attached to my shoulders in the last scene weighed seventy-five pounds. It took four men to lift it gracefully; the two little pageboys couldn't begin to handle it. They just served as royal bumpers.

I was the Empress of all the Russias at last in a court of violence, seduction, intrigue and comedy—choosing my lovers not only for personal pleasure but also for the good of Russia. At the final curtain, the ovations I received from that jam-packed audience would have warmed the heart of Catherine II herself if she were looking down, or *up*, at the proceedings. When I was finally permitted to leave the stage after my curtain speech, I discovered unaccustomed tears in my eyes.

After three fine box-office weeks in Philadelphia during one of the hottest Julys on record, we opened in New York's Shubert Theatre on August 2, 1944. Again I received ovations and the cash customers sounded as if they liked what I gave them. The notices were mixed; many reviewers felt I had made Catherine too "historical" and should have burlesqued the everloving empress from start to finish. They proved to be great box-office notices, however, for, as Ed Sullivan wrote in his column: "If you doubt the box-office oomph of Mae West, consider that she converted *CATHERINE WAS GREAT* into a box-office hit. I don't know any other star strong enough with the public to have accomplished it!"

The public came and paid their respects and musical show prices for a play with only one song: "Strong, Solid, and Sensational." I sang it in a black wig and a peasant's costume. Patrons

kept on coming up to see me for seven months, before we streamlined the show a little and took to the road.

During the Broadway run of *CATHERINE WAS GREAT* I found myself especially attracted to one of Catherine's Palace Guards, whom I'll call Jeff.

He was a broad-shouldered, big-chested, tall young man of foreign extraction. His singing voice was exceptionally good, but he was inclined to be lazy, and so did not make the most of that endowment.

Though he was over twenty years old, he had never had a love affair. Therefore, at that rather advanced age, he was a virgin man, though he had had yearnings.

During rehearsals I did not mind learning that he was attracted to me, but our first date was not an unqualified success, owing to his difficulty. His shyness and his lack of *expertise* made him definitely fascinating, however, and after a little practice he was infatuating. He soon became both ardent and proficient. His initiation into the art of love, and the capture of his virginity, reversed the Pygmalion and Galatea roles and incited in me a special, proprietary feeling which was warm and exciting.

In the course of our romance Jeff became insanely jealous. Once he found a mere gentleman caller in my 57th Street apartment, hauled him down to the sidewalk and beat him. His unlucky victim turned his bleeding face up to me in supplication, as I stood at my window, but I could do nothing to stop Jeff.

Clashes of opinion and temperament caused the romance to be suspended from time to time. Jeff would cast up to me his predecessors, and his mind would grow poisoned with suspicion. If I so much as looked at another man, he would be sure I was planning to forsake him. Then peace would be made.

He wanted me to marry him, though he knew I was not interested in marrying anyone.

CATHERINE WAS GREAT went on a long and profitable tour, beginning in Baltimore early in 1945 and progressing to staid Boston, where apparently I "unstaidered" them, according to one review anyway: ". . . the patrons who packed the theater to capacity roared at the Westian wit and brought the star out for a curtain speech. The speech, a folksy gesture, was short and appropriately snappy. 'Catherine was a great empress. She also had three hundred lovers. I did the best I could in a couple of hours.'"*

My affair with J. went on tour also. In spite of his accusations I was faithful to him until near the end of the tour, when his arguing caused me to transfer my affections to someone else. Then the romance ended for good. Afterward he seemed to lose interest in himself. His personal appearance went to pot, and he seemed unable to absorb himself in another woman. He has, I am told, lived a life of celibacy ever since.

Sometimes it seems to me I've known so many men that the FBI ought to come to me first to compare fingerprints.

Having been hailed by many critics and columnists as "Mae West, the Queen of Sex," I was now playing Catherine, "the Empress of Sex."

It was very strenuous playing the Russian Empress. Running Russia on the stage was almost as hard as the real thing.

We went on to Washington, and for eight performances there at the National Theatre every seat was occupied. I gave a special performance of the show for war veterans. I had been asked to visit some of the servicemen's hospitals in the area, but I said, "Such visits affect me too emotionally, to the point where I can't work or sleep for days afterwards. May I suggest a special performance for as many wounded and convalescent veterans as can be packed into the theatre—just for them?" And they came.

* Fourteen was all I could manage to squeeze into the three acts of the play.

In Washington, I tossed a soirée for Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes, a tough-tempered man, and he got a good-natured ribbing in the papers about having accepted my invitation to "come up and see me sometime." Despite his reputation for being a gruff and belligerent dragon, he could be charming, free and easy when he wanted to. Others who said hello were Sol Bloom, Representative from New York, then the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee; Majority Leader Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky, all cornpone and bourbon charm, and a ladies' man at an advanced age (as he proved by marrying a very young wife); Senator "Happy" Chandler of Kentucky, and Mrs. Chandler; Senator Robert Wagner of New York; and William ("Wild Bill") Donovan, who didn't look wild at all.

March 2, I was the special guest of the Harvard-Yale-Princeton Club of Pittsburgh, the second woman ever to be so honored. I don't want to drop too many names, but Mr. Charles Arbuthnot, III, escorted me to the luncheon where I met leaders in industry, banking, law and assorted professions, all male: Richard L. Stites, Frank G. Darlington, Thomas V. Douglass, Robert A. McKean, Jr., Thomas Watson, C. Holmes Wolfe, F. B. Snowdon, Charles C. Arensberg, Herbert H. Hawkins, and Ralph W. Gibbs.

I made them a little speech: "Gentlemen, I am greatly honored in being your guest of honor. I was happy to accept your invitation when I heard I was to be the only woman present and I would have you all to myself. I am informed that as a rule you do not encourage women to—what I mean is—hang around the place. I understand that I am the second woman ever to be invited here. I never heard what happened to the first. It's rather difficult for me to think up things to say to Harvard-Yale-Princeton men collectively. Of course, I can think of plenty to say to men individually . . . so come up and see me privately—and I'll decorate you."

CATHERINE WAS GREAT curtailed its Chicago run be-

cause I wanted to close at the end of May, before murderous mid-western hot weather set in. I had played through one blistering summer in the heavy robes of the Empress, and I didn't care to go through that again. It was close to a year since I'd first ascended the throne of all the Russias, and I had just about had my full satisfaction of the role. We still had playing commitments in other cities; we left Chicago and played St. Louis, Kansas City, and a series of split-weeks and one- and two-night stands. We ended the tour in Columbus, Ohio, and I went home to Hollywood to spend the summer resting from the strenuous life of a strenuous empress.

F.D.R. had died. In August of 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and the curtain rose on the Atomic Age. The critics gave it long, full coverage, though they worried it would wreck its theatre and everyone in it.

Soon after New Year's, 1946, Jim Timony went to New York on business. J. J. Shubert called me and said that Jim had been in to see him about producing a play with me.

"What play?" I asked J. J. "Jim didn't talk about any play to me before he left."

"*Ring Twice Tonight*. It has a balloon idea running through it."

"Balloon? Wait. I remember reading a play with a balloon some months ago."

J. J. said, "The balloon idea is the only thing I like in the play. I don't like the way the play is written, and I don't know of anyone I would want to put in the starring role the way it is. I told Jim if you would take the play, Mae, and adapt it for yourself, I would produce it. Interested?"

"Maybe. I have a story idea of my own that the balloon idea would fit into."

"So tell me."

"My story is basically a spy story and I can incorporate the balloon into it."

"So go ahead, Mae."

We got the rights from the original authors and I went to work, ballooning.

It was not heavy cloak-and-dagger drama. It was light comedy—hilarious, I hoped, from start to finish.

With the arrival of J. J. Shubert from New York, production matters were smoothed out, and we started rehearsals in Hollywood.

The play was now called *COME ON UP*. We opened the show in the Long Beach, California, auditorium in May, and went on tour, doing fine business. The Chicago *Herald-American* headlined it as "MAE WEST A HIT IN 'COME ON UP'".

Mae West brought her new play, "Come On Up," to Chicago last night before a packed, cheering audience at the Selwyn Theatre.

In "Come On Up," Miss West has simply taken her famous line of years ago—"Come up 'n see me sometime"—and built around it a comedy that involves G-Men, an Argentine diplomat, a United States Senator, two sailors and a flock of other assorted males . . . it is all for laughs and Mae hands them out at the rate of 10 a minute.

It isn't what she says, it is how she says it.

Miss West's art is her own particular art. There is no one quite like her and what she does, she does impeccably.

When she says a man wanted her because he thought she "had atomic energy," it is a splitting line.

Someone says: "You must be good and tired."

Mae replies: "No, just tired."

Sounds terrible, but when Miss West makes you roar despite yourself, you realize what she can do with just a raised hip and a lowered eyebrow.

Laughing with Miss West may be vulgar, yet it is honest vulgarity and there's nothing wrong with that. Miss West is an American institution. She is like Chicago—brazen, colorful, alive and vulgar, if you wish.

From the first row she looked decidedly young and beautiful. And her clothes! Coming onto a pretty nude woman at State and Madison would not make one gasp as much as seeing Miss West in the black and silver creation she wears in her first entrance.

It was late in 1947 that I returned to the Coast and played San Francisco and finally Los Angeles. This was live theatre show business as I liked it, and it liked me.

It had been planned to take *COME ON UP* into New York for a Broadway run. But I wanted to make changes in the cast, get some new gowns, and also make some important changes in the contracts. Just then negotiations for the English production of *DIAMOND LIL* began. I decided to see England first.



*Diamond Lil Abroad—and at
Home*



IN SEPTEMBER I sailed for England on the *Queen Mary*. I was accompanied by my manager, Jim Timony, and a tour manager and two American actors. The rest of the cast would be English.

Hearing that the English were under strict rationing, and heavy with starches, I arranged to have food packages sent over to me every week. I wanted to keep what I had—but in the right places.

From the moment I set foot on the land of Shakespeare, plum pudding, cockney dialect, and Winston Churchill and the rolled umbrella, the English people gave me a fine welcome. There were crowds milling around and cheering. They pushed and shoved and stampeded to get a look. They had only seen me in my films, and when they found me for the first time in person, some were taken aback that I wasn't the over-ripe, bediamonded Lil. I only wore (besides clothes) my 22-carat diamond ring and a two-inch wide diamond and platinum bracelet.

"It's no use dazzling people," Jim said. "Just impress them till you get them into the theatre."

"I'm here to play *DIAMOND LIL*, not Lady Godiva," I told the reporters.

The press recorded my costume and jewels. "Nothing could have been less revealing or more modest than the evening gown in which Miss West greeted Southampton. It was black georgette high to the throat with pale pink yoke embroidered with bugle beads. It swept the floor, draped the hips and had wrist-length sleeves."

In London at the Savoy Hotel a suite was reserved for me. Work on the play began immediately. When the show was ready, we went to Manchester (mob scenes in the streets), where we were to open our first engagement in what Londoners call the "provinces." I looked out the train window and all I could see was rain and fog.

"I know I'm going to love Manchester," I told Jim, "if I can only see it."

The train conductor said, "We call it a light dim-over. Rather clear for Manchester."

The next day *DIAMOND LIL* opened at the Palace Theatre and met with a fine reception in the dim-over. The show did a week of great business and we went on tour. While in Birmingham, I visited Fort Dunlop, where the original airman's life-saving jackets were manufactured, and named "Mae Wests" by the R.A.F.

In Scotland MacDonald Carey, of the Glasgow *Sunday Express*, took me on a drive to the lakes.

"There's Ben Lomond," he pointed out.

"Who's *he*?" I asked.

What else would I think of but a man, not a mountain.

By the time I opened in London, I held the box-office records for the theaters I'd played in Glasgow, Birmingham and Blackpool. They were wonderful people everywhere I went.

At the start of 1948, *DIAMOND LIL* opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre. Noel Whitcomb of the *Daily Mirror* wrote: "The

audience was littered with stars, producers, impresarios, barrow-millionaires and similar colorful types."

Hannen Swaffer, tough, hard, and powerful critic, wrote: "*Diamond Lil* in the legendary person of Mae West, came to London last night—and conquered it. Miss West received an ovation when she first appeared. At the end the applause was vociferous and sustained. Every minute is entertainment."

I played two shows a night in order to satisfy the ticket demand. Otherwise, Jim estimated, I'd have had to stay two years. The first show started at six in the evening, and the second at nine; we played no matinees. It was a severe strain; my performance was highly energetic as I climaxed my dramatic tempo with a dynamic delivery of my song numbers.

The actor Barry O'Neill, who had been my leading man in *SEX*, came around to see me. He was still handsome, but time had marked Barry. He was open-mouthed when he saw me. "Mae, you appear as young as when I held you in my arms on stage at Daly's Theatre in 1926."

"I can't cast you as my leading man in *DIAMOND LIL*, but I have a good part for you."

"I'll take it. A job is a job—with you."

I had a number of proposals while I was in London. The marriage kind and variations. Anyone who thinks Englishmen are cold can't recognize a dish when it's cooking on the front burner. My rather special appeal for college men in England was no different from what it had been in New Haven thirty years before.

The fog even came into the Prince of Wales Theatre. There were times on the brilliantly lighted stage when the actors across from me were only a yellow blur. It was the first time I ever played a show in a fog. (A critic might say there are some actors who never play a show in anything else.)

After eight unforgettably happy months in England, I said my fond goodbyes to the fog, rain, new friends, and exciting cities,

mannered gentlemen, Oxford students, pipe-smoking journalists, and welk bars (which serve a small sea snail eaten with a pin), and sailed for home. I like to recall that sense of solid firmness and loyalty which is an outstanding trait of the British character; once you have won their affection, they like you forever.

They can always refresh their memories of me by dropping into Madame Tussaud's famous wax museum, where there is a life-size figure labelled MAE WEST, among all the historical big wheels, murderers, heroes, and favorite characters in fiction.

I left a word of caution: "Don't play the song "Frankie and Johnny" in here; I might get to melting all over Napoleon."

It was May, 1948, when we got back from England. When the ship docked in New York, a large crowd of friends and fans were waiting to welcome me; also the reporters and photographers. Having spent most of my time in theatres, I was naturally asked what I had observed of the international situation and world problems.

Another kind of welcoming committee was present to greet me with papers in a suit brought against me by two men named O'Brien and Kane (neither of whom I had ever met, or even heard of before). They had first filed suit in New York. Nothing had come of it in New York, but now, apparently, something was going to come of it in Los Angeles. They wanted \$100,000 of my money—like many people they treated me as a bank—claiming I had used their material in my play *CATHERINE WAS GREAT*, and that they had outright ownership of certain sections of Russian history, and that Catherine—no matter what her morals—was not public domain.

I was again faced with a lawsuit by people I didn't know, and with whom I'd had no dealings whatever. I said to Jim, "Just back from eight strenuous months in England, the last four of them doing a three-act play twice a night, and in need of

a good rest. And I'm now to be dragged into a court trial full of tensions and irritations."

"Don't worry. We'll make a detailed comparison of your *CATHERINE WAS GREAT* with the material the O'Brien-Kane duo claim you used."

"How will it look in court, Jim?"

"The sum and substance of the comparison and analysis of your play and their material, our lawyers say, plainly show no specific resemblances. There was not a line of your play they could claim had been taken from theirs."

"What will I wear in court?"

I didn't wear my costume as Catherine, even if I was tempted to just to show off the part.

We went to trial in Los Angeles, August 24, 1948, in Superior Court with Judge Samuel R. Blake on the bench, and a jury of eight women and four men.

All court trials are alike—the jabberwocky of lawyers, the ritual of legal doubletalk, the various versions of what it was all about and finally the judge nodding as if it were all a holy rite.

It lasted seven long weeks—the hottest weeks of the year in Southern California. There were times when the courtroom was blue with smog, partly due to the local phenomenon and partly to the plaintiffs' attorneys attempts to becloud the issues. They confused the jury with the long dull reading of various scripts into evidence, and then insisting on the reading of history books and biographies of Catherine used as research. All this took days. The jurors, simple orange growers and second-hand car dealers, became more and more bewildered.

For me it was a production trying to get to court at ten o'clock every morning through the early haze and the white California sun trying to burn up the day. The newspapers circused the case; I was front-paged, second-paged, feature-paged and photo-paged.

Meanwhile a group of actors were standing by in New York,

waiting for me to do a revival of *DIAMOND LIL*. Like Tennyson's "Brook," the play seemed to go on forever—revival after revival, a perpetual insurance policy for me.

I ran into trouble in the courtroom. Honest people don't have perfect records, defenses prepared beforehand already proved. Unfortunately for my defense, the registration records of my own early Catherine scripts had met with careless handling. The Writers' Club of Hollywood, where I had registered my earliest versions, had burned down, and what had been left of their filed scripts had been transferred to the Screen Writers' Guild. But identification of them was no longer available. Then the floods in 1933, 1934 and 1936 had destroyed the valuable records I'd thought were safe in locked trunks stored in the basement of my apartment house. They were reduced to pulp by the flood waters.

The plaintiffs took every advantage of these circumstances to raise doubts in the minds of the already overheated, confused jurors. A jury of my peers is a fine thing, but a few people who knew show business would have helped matters a bit more.

On October 5, Judge Blake gave the case to the jury and they retired to deliberate on the evidence. It took them four slow days to weigh the mountain of testimony and study the truckload of exhibits that had grown higher daily during the seven weeks. They were often lost in the legal maze and came out several times to request further instructions from the judge.

While the jury was out, it was still necessary for me to be in court each day. There was no telling at what moment the jury would send word that they had reached a verdict. I was confident that it would be in my favor, but the waiting was a bore.

On October 8, after four days of untangling my case, the jury came in and reported they were hopelessly deadlocked; I heard seven to five in my favor. It needs at least nine to return a verdict in a civil case. When the foreman of the jury announced,

"We are deeply humiliated to report we have failed to agree on a decision," Judge Blake declared a mistrial and dismissed the jury, who looked as if just freed from a chain gang.

The seven jurors who wanted a verdict in my favor told me they had been with me from the start.

"Thank you," I said. "At least, you now know Russian court history."

I immediately had other things to occupy my mind. The case had been an exhausting experience, but I had no time to take on anything like a rest. In New York City, a producer and fifty actors were waiting for me to revive *DIAMOND LIL*.

Jim said to me, "Do you mind going alone, Mae?"

"It will be the first time, Jim, in our long association, you'll not be there."

"I haven't been feeling too well since we returned from England, and that damn long trial hasn't helped."

I saw he didn't feel well enough to make the journey. This worried me. I had never known Jim to be really sick. With his love of show business, I knew he must be feeling bad if it kept him away while I was putting on a show.

I told him, "Put yourself under a doctor's care right away."

He said he would, but he was very stubborn about doctors, and I don't think he took my advice.

On the Santa Fe Super-Chief, often called "the stainless steel tunnel" between California and New York, was a professional football team, the Chicago Bears, on their way home from playing the Los Angeles Rams. They discovered I was on the train and the wonderful monsters lost no time in getting around to see me. They crowded into my drawing room. We traded laughs, and they helped enliven the trip as far as Chicago. They wore silk pants on the playing fields, but they weren't sissies.

A production of *DIAMOND LIL* was due for an Ameri-

can revival. I hadn't played the show in New York or anywhere else in America since early in 1930. *LIL* never seemed to age.

The opening night of *DIAMOND LIL* in New York was one of the most memorable opening nights I remember from either in front or behind the footlights. The supposedly know-it-all blasé first nighters brought me back for curtain call after curtain call. After I was able to quiet the audience, I introduced my leading men. One of the actors, a nervous type, attempted to make a short curtain speech. It came out: "Thank you, Miss West . . . I—I've always wanted to . . . to play with you."

It got such a tremendous howl from the audience that the ad lib curtain speech was, at my insistence, left in the show every night. Accidental humor, I have found out, is often the best. No writer can invent situations and lines that one stumbles into. Also an audience often creates its own humor out of what is originally an innocent line.

Brooks Atkinson, of *The New York Times*, wrote: "It is twenty years since she first singed New York with this study of anatomy, but Mae is holding out all right, and has, in fact, become a part of American folklore."

Before opening the show, I had asked the producer to find me a piano accompanist for my song numbers. "He has to be tops."

"I know just the man for you. Remember the pianist in the pit who accompanied you at the theatre on Broadway, where I was house manager?"

"Yes. Can you get him?"

"I can try."

"Well, try hard."

As soon as I saw the pianist, whom I'll call X., I remembered him. He was very attractive and charming, and like all musicians he was somewhat sensitive. It wasn't very long before he was my escort around town. This caused a certain amount of disappointment among some of the other men in the cast, among whom I

had detected special hopefulness. As a matter of fact, there were two or three that I'd found attractive and might have become interested in.

After my accompanist's arrival, the members of the cast made bets as to how long he'd last, and who would be next in line. X. made it his business to be with me constantly.

He would have made a wonderful husband if I had been the marrying kind. I wasn't, though he spoke to me of marriage often. I couldn't say yes to him, which made him unhappy.

Though I have turned down many proposals of marriage through the years, I have never regretted not being the marrying kind. But I was sort of sorry for the men who were, and who loved me.

I accepted an invitation from John Chapman, drama critic of the *Daily News*, to appear on his first television show. "It means a lot to me, Miss West, to have you."

"It means a tight schedule for me. Your show is on between my matinee and my evening performance."

This left me little time after the matinee to get to my hotel across town, have dinner, dress for the TV show, get to the station, make my appearance, and then return to the Coronet Theatre in time for my evening performance.

John said, "A police motor escort has been arranged. Our pinpointed schedule will not be upset by delays in traffic."

"I'll be ready. But I'm not riding on the handlebars of any motor bike."

"No, no, it's all closed cars."

It was a tight fit to get everything in place that day, but I thought I had done it. Ready on time, I stepped into the powder room for a final check on my makeup in the mirror. I turned to go and my heel caught in a frayed place in a small rug, which threw me, and I fell. A sharp agony of pain stabbed me, a fearful cutting gouge of pain. Instantly, I knew something serious had

happened to my left ankle. Larry Lee, my managing assistant, ran in. I gasped, "My leg!"

I was carried carefully to my bed, and my physician, Dr. Alexander Altschul, was called. John Chapman, standing by, was sympathetic, but after being assured that my doctor was on the way, he had to rush off to his TV station, for "the show must go on," as banal a slogan as the theatre ever had.

Dr. Altschul arrived, professionally serious, and examined my ankle. He said, "Mac, it will require the attention of an orthopedic surgeon. It's a sharp break."

"Get the best in New York," I said. "I like my ankle very much, and I want to be sure it gets attended properly."

"I'll get you the finest—Dr. Lester Breidenbach. He's our man." He phoned. Dr. Breidenbach wasn't "immediately available," the doctors' exchange service said. "But we will locate him."

I was keeping a tight grip on myself. I said, "Call the theatre. Refund, cancel."

Until Dr. Breidenbach arrived, there was nothing I could do but just lie there. I had to remain perfectly still. "Fortunately," said Dr. Altschul, "you didn't try to stand on the injured ankle after the accident. If you had, you'd have done irreparable damage."

The producer came up sadly to stand by. At ten o'clock Dr. Breidenbach, a calm, quiet-spoken man, arrived and took a skilled look at my ankle. I could see from his face it wasn't a simple thing.

"How bad is it, Doctor? I want to know."

"We'll be able to tell better after we X-ray it at the hospital."

The producer asked, "How soon do you think, Doctor, Miss West will be able to return to the show? I'm not cruel, but there is no such thing possible as having an understudy for her. The show will have to stay closed until she can again appear in it."

"I can't predict the exact time she'll be ready to return to the show. It is possible that in a few days, with her ankle in a cast, she might be able to stand on it."

The producer was glad to grasp at any bit of hope for an early reopening of the show. Even I, in pain as I was, could hardly blame them for thinking of our two-hundred-thousand-dollar advance sale of tickets, all or part of which would have to be refunded, depending on how long the show remained closed. He went out and announced a reopening date a week ahead.

I was skillfully transported by ambulance to Doctors Hospital and there it was discovered that my ankle had sustained a triple fracture and dislocation. "It's the kind of damage to the ankle that parachute jumpers sometimes experience," the doctor said.

"I was always a high flier," I said as they shot me full of pain killer.

Dr. Breidenbach operated, and, because of his surgical skill, my ankle works as well today as it ever has. But it didn't heal enough to open the show again that season. February to June I spent in New York with my ankle in a cast. Then I went home to Hollywood, accompanied by X., to wait patiently for the full healing processes. I was a bad waiter, but I was a good healer.

The producers and investors in the show were heart-broken at seeing \$200,000 refunded to ticket-holders. Some people held on to their tickets until all hope of seeing me in *DIAMOND LIL* was gone.

So with knitting bones and enforced leisure, I found myself back in Southern California, where the shadow of the television aerials was already on the studio's hopes and everyone seemed living in the last days of Pompeii.



Desert Love



THE NEXT four years saw me, fully recovered, tour the country with *DIAMOND LIL* and play four Broadway runs with it. I even played it high in the Rockies, forty miles from Denver, in the tough old mining town of Central City, which looked like something out of a Hollywood horse opera. In its boom days more gold had been taken out of its hills than from anywhere else in the world. The flavor of the early frontier was there, and this West, as Diamond Lil, fitted into its rugged setting.

During the run of the play, a band of Indians came down out of the hills, and in a picturesque ceremony made me an Indian Princess of the Lakota tribe: She-Who-Mountains-In-Front.

The first reopening of the play on Broadway I called "Doctors' Night." Dr. Lester Breidenbach and Dr. Alexander Altschul were in the audience as my guests. I told the audience "I owe my presence on stage to them," and introduced the doctors. "It's been said that I injured my ankle stepping over men. That's not true. It was a rug that threw me."

There were still people outside of New York City who wanted to see Lil, so we made several tours.

Nearing the end of the last run of *DIAMOND LIL* in New York City, in 1952, I was looking forward to getting home to Hollywood and taking a long overdue vacation. I was still playing *LIL* on Broadway when Alexander Ince, producer and one-time publisher of *Theatre Arts Magazine*, came to see me. He talked to me about a play that Lee Shubert had recommended as possibly a good vehicle for me. "It's called *Sextette*, and written by an Englishwoman."

"I'll read it."

I found it quite amusing and brightly written, and saw a possibility in it. Lee Shubert wanted me to come back to Broadway in the fall with this new play. As usual, I made arrangements to rewrite the play to fit my style, and as soon as I got back to Hollywood I worked on it while I was supposed to be resting.

My old friend, Jim Timony, because of ill health had been unable to accompany me on tours. He could no longer take trips, or cold weather, and had remained in California. In 1950, Jim had been hospitalized. It was found he had a heart condition and other complications, so while he had remained fairly active around Hollywood, he showed little improvement. I was pained to see how much his health had deteriorated.

"Don't worry, Mae," he said. "I haven't lost my interest in show business, and I've got plans of one sort or another. How's the progress on the rewriting of *Sextette*? It should shape up into a great show for you."

"It's making progress, Jim."

Alexander Ince, the producer, began talking of the advantages of trying out the show in summer stock. "It would be a good way to break in the show, Mae, and have it ready for the fall season on Broadway. Most of the summer theatres are near resorts, and it would be a pleasant, profitable and relaxing way to spend the summer."

"That I could use."

It may look like fun from the front of the house, this summer

stock. But no matter how much fun it is to do a show, it is very hard work, and definitely not relaxing.

The summer stock managers started their billing and advertising, announcing not a play, just "MAY WEST COMING SOON."

Summer stock rulings, I learned, allow only one week of rehearsal, and the cast of a show had to be made up mostly of stock players at each summer theatre, and the apprentice actors attached to each group.

This I knew would certainly not do for *Sextette*, which would require a highly skilled actor in each part.

Herbert Kenwith, who had been a capable stage manager for *DIAMOND LIL* during my 1950-1951 tours, was operating the summer theatre at Princeton, New Jersey. I was scheduled to open there two weeks from my arrival in New York. Herb turned slightly chartreuse when I told him I couldn't do *Sextette*, and explained why.

"Miss West! We're sold out in advance, and so is every summer theatre on the circuit that you're booked to play."

I said, "I could do *COME ON UP*. The show has lots of small, good parts. Outside of casting a few key characters in New York, the rest of the parts can be handled by stock players."

"Anything you want to do, Miss West, just as long as you appear."

So I was doing an old play and not a new one as I invaded the citronella and straw-hat theatres that summer. I played my first summer theatres with *COME ON UP*, and it was ideal summer fare. It played to sellouts everywhere.

Late in September, after a very interesting summer, I returned to Hollywood.

Jim's health was failing. I remained in Hollywood to be near him. I attended to the business details of some properties I owned and discussed making a television series.

Hollywood was like a mouse being followed by a cat called television. The once great trembled. Many died of fright. No

one tried to outpoint TV. I was approached again and again to do another picture. Producers like Jerry Wald came to me, convinced they had a great story for me. I was convinced that the stories were just not right for me.

I took a house for Jim at Malibu Beach, where the sun and sea air at least made him feel better. All negotiations for me to do a play on Broadway that season were flatly ended by me.

Then, too, with him incapacitated, I had to take over myself the management of the many real estate properties in which I had invested, and which the building boom was making very complicated. I did appreciate some helpful pointers I received from my cousin, Henry Doelger, of San Francisco. Henry was the builder and developer of the fabulous Westlake, Daly City, in San Mateo County, California—a really tremendous project. Today, there are more than 120,000 people living in this beautiful development of distinctive homes, and Henry has gained the distinction of being one of the world's largest builders.

The following April, 1954, Jim passed on. My only consolation at losing his long friendship was the knowledge that he had lived a good life, done the things he loved to do, had had a colorful and exciting career from his boyhood on. His death was a shock to his countless friends.

One of Jim Timony's last plans was to build a luxury hotel, with casino and theater-restaurant, in Las Vegas. For the use of my name in connection with it I would receive good and worthy consideration. They had a lively movement in Las Vegas real estate near the site of the proposed "Diamond Lil Hotel," to be named for my world famous stage and screen characterization.

A Mr. America Contest was being held in Los Angeles. A long line of tanned, muscled torsos faced me whichever way I turned. Biceps flexed in salute as I passed. The new Mr. America of 1954 was asked whom he would like to meet in Hollywood. He

answered in wide-eyed earnestness: "I would like to go up and see Mae West."

A mutual friend, George, a former Mr. America, said he'd phone me and see if he could arrange an appointment.

I told him I was about to go to my ranch in the valley, but if some of the muscle boys wanted to come over, I'd delay the trip.

They arrived, their suits bursting with health, and my butler ushered them into my living room. There were only a dozen, but the room looked crowded. They examined my living room, and one said it was like a motion picture set. It was a comment I had heard many times; the room is done in plain white and gold, with Louis XIV furniture; the piano, the carpets and drapes are all white. There are several oil paintings of me as a classic nude (in which I'm interesting without being vulgar), and a marble statue of me, unclothed, made by Gladys Lewis Bush, a famous sculptor.

In this magnificent herd of males the thirty-year-old Mr. America was outstanding. He took my hand and I read in his glance a rising excitement, and sensed a subtle tension of some new emotion in him. He had the face and body that writers describe as that of a Greek god. Socrates would have drooled over him, and Plato written a dialogue about him.

I found out after a few meetings that this man was considerably more than a magnificent body, all looks and muscles. He had depth and sensitivity, and an inquiring mind.

He said, "Mae, you are the end of my search for an ideal; my dream come true. I'm lucky my search hasn't been long."

"How long can a search be when you're so young?"

"This is my first true love, my only love."

"I find you very lovable indeed," I said.

The talk of lovers should never be put down on paper, even if Bernard Shaw did say his love affairs were all perfect only on paper.

With my new friend I became aware of a "new emotion" that gave a splendor to our union.

It was his experience too. To him, he said, it meant a love so complete that it embraced not only our bodies, but our minds and spirits—a perfect union of the mental, physical and spiritual.

This sense of spiritual union scared me. It could mean, if I let it, a too complete surrender—the surrender of personality I have always fought against. I have never wanted a love that meant absorption of my whole being, surrender of my self-possession. A love like that is too all-consuming.

Before, when I had felt the onset of that kind of love—when it threatened, if you will—I had always pushed it away from me. Perhaps two or three times before in my life I was drawn to it, desired it momentarily, but then, with an effort of will, I had cut it off. This I could do because the pattern of my life continually kept little groups of men conveniently at hand. In short, savage affairs with some I smothered the need for a deeper love, and remained myself and in command of my career.

Now it was happening again, and dangerously. If the first time had been the last, no repetition could have transcended its perfection. Like a solitaire of supreme purity, cut, and brilliance, and enormous value, its gem-like perfection was fixed in time. It stood alone, unique, whole.

I was afraid that this time it was not meant for me to ignore the demands of a love that would close me in, absorb me in a forgetfulness of all else. I knew myself. If I accepted this, nothing more would matter.

However, I was not permitted to enjoy our love in private for long. The night club business after the end of World War II had changed in character and entertainment. The finer clubs had become theatre-restaurants, such as Lou Walters' Latin Quarter in New York, the Chez Paree in Chicago, and the fantastically overripe hotels in Las Vegas. They were all engaging the biggest names in show business; all that big money could buy.

My agents were urging me to give the theatre-restaurants a try. They said, "Once you've tried it, you'll like it."

There were other things I had tried and liked. I said, "I'll take a little trip to Vegas and case the place."

At night Las Vegas rests like a necklace of many-colored jewels, flashing neon brilliance up to a million-starred sky. Driving from California, across moon craters, Gila-monsters, old Indian forts, the moment one hits the shimmering strip of hotels and casinos, excitement takes over. Sometimes it's 120 degrees of the devil's breath, but inside it's always cool. Mink and work shirts rub in passing. Silver dollars are small change.

With my escorts, I hit the high spots of this gold gulch pleasure town. The flamboyant and frantic hotels were full of people seeking luck at The Flamingo, Desert Inn, El Rancho, Sands, and the Sahara. It was a frontier of buckskins, Jaguars, Capri pants, Bronx accents, Death Valley tans, dollar cigars and a few embezzlers spending their future in a couple of hours. I looked, talked, thought and considered this neon-lit, man-made adult Disneyland. Where would I do best?

I preferred the Sahara for a show because of a large stage. I could see myself doing a show there after they made me an enormous offer. It was not that I was greedy, but gamblers judge everything by the value one puts on oneself. They wanted no bargain, they could afford the best.

I had to get an act ready for a July 21 opening, and June was running out. I would have to create material, get special song numbers written, have gowns designed and made, and decide just who and what I wanted in the act.

One night I looked at my muscle man. "Why not? I can use you in the act."

When word got around that he was to be in my act, Muscle Beach at Santa Monica moved to Hollywood. The boys all wanted me to look at and touch their muscles. That, of course, was impossible; there were too many of them. A few of the best

added to my show would, I felt, give me something different for the night club business, and supply something for the women in my audiences.

All through the years, night clubs have aimed at something for the men—girl floor shows. And the wives and sweethearts have had to sit bored, while their men applauded female semi-nudity. I was going to give the women something to look at.

By the time I was ready to rehearse my act, I had ten of the finest muscle men available. I also had a group of professional male singers and dancers.

I received a long distance call from my admirer and dear friend of many years, Vincent Lopez, former World's Heavyweight Champion. He had become a shrewd and enterprising businessman in Mexico with mining properties, and several successful inventions to his credit.

He arrived a day or two before I was to leave, and we talked and arranged that he would accompany me to the Las Vegas engagement as my personal manager. He was a capable and imposing escort, and was of great assistance to me. The only trouble was that my poor young muscle boyfriend decided life was not worth living with Vince running things for me. He threatened to commit suicide.

I wasn't giving him or any other man much thought. All my energy and emotions were directed toward creating a great show, perfecting myself in the songs and material I was to do, and seeing to it that the whole act was so coordinated that when I stepped out on the stage opening night I could give the audience everything they expected, and a lot more. Perhaps this was cruel, but I had lived too long in the theatre to change.

I said, "I am not having any rendezvous of a romantic nature with Lopez or anyone else. He's here strictly as my business manager."

The muscle man's attitude improved. He seemed considerably

less upset and ate hearty again and slept. He went back to sunbathing and tanning lotion.

Meanwhile, I worked on my own problems. I felt that just being with me in the show and getting an excellent salary, my muscle man would be happy. But lovers, I have learned, want more than happiness. I was not mistaken. This one persisted in getting emotional at any and all opportunities.

We opened at the Sahara to an audience that had fought for reservations. My act was novel, the muscle men in their tiger skin G-strings eyefilling, and my new gowns and songs very effective. From my opening number, "I Want to Do All Day, What I Do All Night," to my curtain speech, the response was wildly happy. Night club owners from all over the country flew in to see the show. They wanted me; a happy state. I accepted bookings at high fees from only those who had theatre-restaurants with adequate stages. I had the satisfaction of breaking attendance records at the Sahara, in an entertainment medium that was new to me, among people who let themselves go—many for the first time in their lives.

The Sahara's owner, Mr. Milton Prell, presented me with a costly diamond and platinum bracelet. "As a token of our appreciation, Miss West."

I said, requoting Gertrude Stein, "Ice is nice at any price." And, as I say, diamonds is my career.

But meanwhile feelings were developing between my two companions. When the three of us had had dinner together in Las Vegas, and later, during the Reno engagement, things had seemed pleasant, muscled and very masculine. When we returned to Los Angeles and were preparing to fly to New York to begin a tour of several months' bookings, I was made fully aware of the situation of our new design for living.

Vince Lopez insisted on continuing with me on tour, saying: "I am happy, Mae, at this opportunity to be with you. Before it

was impossible, as your manager, Jim, wouldn't permit another guy in whom you might be interested to travel with you."

"Vince, he feared it would distract me from my work and keep me from giving my best in a show."

"He was right," said Lopez. "Now, I'm manager and I see it."

During the tour I was able to reassure my muscle man. "When we get back to Los Angeles, I will have more time for you. Lopez says at the Christmas holidays he's going to Mexico to attend to affairs he has been neglecting during the tour."

This revived his hopes and he flexed his muscles harder than ever in the act.

Lopez, however, didn't leave for Mexico at Christmas as anticipated. He remained with me.

In February, 1955, we were playing the *Chez Paree* in Chicago. Then we went on to San Francisco—a wonderful place to me—with its steep streets, the salt fog walking inland, the cosmopolitan feeling lacking in brasher, shriller Los Angeles. In San Francisco we appeared at the Italian Village, a famous theatre-restaurant.

Back in Los Angeles, Mr. America had come to me with an ultimatum: "Either Lopez leaves, or I leave."

"A week before our *Ciro's* opening? There is only that one week to play. The show will close and Lopez will be leaving for Mexico."

"He goes now, Mae."

"Vince Lopez has been a very dear friend for many years. I want to keep him that way. You don't just tell a friend to up and leave."

He thought for a while and said, "I guess that lets me out."

I really thought he'd have a change of heart and be with the show at *Ciro's*. But at rehearsal before the opening he did not appear. I promoted a new boy from the line.

The show opened and ran smoothly and with its customary success.

My ex-muscle man came around to the stage entrance on opening night and talked to the boys during a break. Perhaps he thought someone would tell me he was there, and I would ask him to come back to see me. No one informed me he was there.

When the show closed I didn't accept any further bookings, but went to my beach house in Santa Monica to rest after a really strenuous tour.

Lopez left for Mexico to take care of his personal business. Most of the body-builders from the show were down at Muscle Beach, a nearby stretch of sand where they had weights and other athletic equipment for body-building. Some of the boys would come up and visit me at the beach house. Chuck, one of the best of the muscle men, dropped in most often.

Chuck had an air of serious liveliness about him one day that I supposed conveyed his happiness at having me all alone.

I said, "George tells me you've had me on your mind kind of, for quite a while."

"No one has any idea of what I really feel about you."

"Anyone else in the company know?"

"I'm very secretive."

"I figured you were the strong silent type."

There is a pattern in all men when they suddenly spring their secret. Chuck looked at me and said, "I love you."

"You certainly are a man 'what takes his time.'"

"You were always so preoccupied with others, I had to bide my time."

This recalled to me an incident which occurred during our return engagement at the Sahara in Las Vegas that had me quite upset at the time. This was when two of the men in the company got into a jealous argument over me, and one threatened the other with a gun. He in turn purchased a gun the following day to protect himself.

I was afraid this might lead to a tragic incident with resulting bad publicity. I finally managed to smooth out the situation.

Now I said, "Chuck, you do deserve some special consideration." And he got it.

When I reopened the show in July of 1955 at Lake Tahoe, Chuck became my constant escort.

In April, 1956, I reopened my original show at the Latin Casino in Philadelphia. While dressing my hair in my suite at the Warwick Hotel, my new personal hairdresser remarked:

"That muscle man in the show named Miklos says he is in love with you."

I gave the hairdresser a direct look. "Did you know that he is a married man with a child?"

He acted surprised, a curl of my hair in one hand. "I didn't know that he was married."

From Philadelphia we went to New York and opened at the Latin Quarter. I had previously established a fourteen-year record, topping the highest figures of Sophie Tucker, Frank Sinatra, and Milton Berle. Berle had held the record of \$64,000 for a week. I had the pleasure of topping that with \$97,000 for a week on my first appearance, and this time I bettered my former record with \$100,000 for one week.

Muscle man Miklos started hanging around my dressing room every night. There was an item in a New York newspaper column: "Two of her champion muscle boys are looking daggers at each other over Mae."

Chuck, seeing the newspaper article, told Miklos, "Stay away from Miss West's dressing-room."

I didn't want any trouble backstage, but I felt it wrong to interfere with two men who saw each other as rivals.

Miklos appealed to the company manager, who informed me that Miklos said he was very unhappy and couldn't sleep nights because I wouldn't see him.

He also went to the Latin Quarter's publicity man and complained to him that he was barred from my dressing room by

Chuck. Miklos begged the publicity man to explain to Miss West how he felt and to see if he could arrange to get him together with Miss West.

I told the publicity man that I could not become interested in Miklos in any kind of romantic relationship, as I did not want to become involved in any way with a married man. Besides I was interested in someone else.

When Miklos realized that he had been flatly rejected by me as a suitor, he became very angry, vindictive, and revengeful. He gave out a lot of false stories and derogatory statements to the press regarding me, which were the direct opposite of the true facts. By so doing, he tried to rebuild his deflated ego at my expense.

While this bad publicity continued, we opened in Washington, D. C., at the Casino Royal. I thought it high time to call a halt to his false and vicious statements to the press. I called a press conference in my dressing room at the Casino Royal, to tell the true facts.

Uninvited, Miklos forced his way into the crowded dressing room past the doorman I had stationed to keep out intruders.

He immediately made another false statement in front of the newsmen, that I was the cause of his wife seeking a divorce. This was just too, too much.

Upon this deliberate lie, Chuck quickly stepped in front of him and said, "Stop your lying. You be careful what you say."

Miklos raised his arm and, in angry and excited tones, said, "I say anything I want!"

In a flash, Chuck raised his fist and let him have it, and down went Miklos. It was necessary to summon an ambulance to cart him away for repairs.

Later, Miklos started a lawsuit for \$100,000 against me and Chuck. I was anxious for the case to be brought to trial. I wanted to establish the facts, not the false, derogatory stuff that he gave

to the papers. I was fortified with sworn statements and affidavits from various people who knew the facts I hoped to introduce at the trial.

Miklos, Mr. Troublemaker, only filed the suit for more publicity, as he didn't appear in Washington to give his deposition, and the suit was dismissed by the judge "with prejudice."

Living my life by my own codes, I was an easy victim for certain types of under-the-rock journalism. In 1957, the State of California, through its then Attorney General, Edmund G. ("Pat") Brown (now Governor), and the County of Los Angeles through its District Attorney, William T. McKesson, cracked down on the scandal magazine *Confidential* and its sister in smear-and-smut, *Whisper*, with a criminal libel suit. Brought into the suit was an outfit called Hollywood Research, Inc., which the state charged supplied the magazines with information and material for stories about screen stars and celebrities which were libelous and obscene.

In 1955, *Confidential* had published an article about me, entitled "Mae West's Open Door Policy," in which it was stated that a former chauffeur of mine had more than an employer-employee relationship with me. That I had recklessly given him a Duesenberg car, had bought his old, gray-haired mother a home; that I had supplied him with expensive zoot-sharp clothes and hundreds of dollars a week to gamble casually with, and that he had lived at my apartment in luxury for a year.

None of these things was true except the simple fact that he had worked for me as a chauffeur for four months, from October, 1935, to February, 1936. He received his salary and that was all. Any of the cars he drove, including *my* Duesenberg, was part of his job as a chauffeur. He only drove the Duesenberg about three times, and that was to have its gas tank filled. Since it was a sportscar, I never had a chauffeur drive me in it.

After the *Confidential* article appeared, my ex-chauffeur and his wife immediately signed affidavits denying the false statements in the magazine. I presented documentary proof in the form of canceled salary checks for every week he worked for me, together with sworn statements, to the authorities.

Twenty-four hours before my former chauffeur was to testify against *Confidential* in the criminal libel suit brought against the magazine by the State, he was found dead in his bathtub.

Confidential's publisher, Robert Harrison, on November 12, 1957, announced loudly, in paid advertising, that *Confidential* would forthwith cease publishing any more "exposés" about the love lives of actors and actresses. In return, the State of California wound up its prosecution of *Confidential* on the charge of criminal libel, by collecting a fine of \$5,000.

I did not change my way of life. I had harmed no one. I had a philosophy, an idea of how to live fully and in my way. I believed in it as fully and as strongly as I believed in being an American.



A Real Star Never Stops



I AM NEARING the end of my story to date, told honestly and the way I lived it, within limits. There are some few moments that cannot be put down on paper, but I have more than hinted at these things, and have here and there highlighted what I have been, and what I am now. And even what I hope to be.

My life has been for me a splendid prelude to what I still hope to do. There are novels to write, plays to polish, ideas to put into a form that is the best theatre for them. In my frankness, there is no bragging, and in my love life there is, I hope, no snicker of vanity and no glee in being just naughty.

I have done what I set out to do, which was to review the highlights on the curves of a life that has been more colorful than most, but also a life that goes down deeply into the human enigma, the problems of man (and woman) in relation to the godhead and the yet unopened secrets of the universe. If I have supplied only part of the answers that is more than most, who don't even know the questions.

I have tried to live with hands-on-hips dignity and a style (my

own, to be sure), but proudly. I have done some few things I would perhaps like to see undone, but in the main I have held firmly to my ideas and my values, and I have looked them in the face (and bodies, when the face didn't matter). I have come up with no great solution to the human dilemma, but I have made a peace, or perhaps only an armed truce, with myself and the universe. I am in key with my world as I know it and have seen it.

The various men in my life can claim a great many things, but never that they had a dull time. I have never posed as the final definitive expert on the sexes, but I have done my own field work. And if I disagreed at times with the Mahatma of the Libido, the late Doctor Kinsey, I said so in print. I wrote him a letter that appeared in a magazine when he was causing a great deal of alarming revaluing of the theme and variations of this thing called sex. I have a copy; here it is:

My dear Dr. Kinsey:—

I have never been frightened of sex. My saying that might get a laugh because, as an actress, I'm so thoroughly established as a sex personality that I am often accused of being capable of injecting double-entendre into a simple request for a cup of coffee. So again, and meaning it—I have never been frightened of sex. Instinctively, I suppose, I have always felt sex to be what your report shows it to be—a kind of standard equipment of the human species, without which man might just as well be a mollusk or an amoeba. (I checked those two, and they're dull characters.)

The sexual behavior of human males does not surprise me. Neither will sexual behavior in the human female, as you report it.

Some years ago I tried to report a few truths about that kind of behavior myself, in a play I wrote and starred in, called, frankly enough, *SEX*. . . .

I have been reporting on sex from time to time, ever since. Our approaches to and handling of the subject are different, but both of us are out in the open about it. Your approach is scientific, observing, investigating, classifying, statistical. Mine involves at least the first two of those methods, but, when it comes to statistics,

I'm afraid the only figure I employ is my own. And that figure, which has become internationally familiar, stands for sex—just as your report of facts and figures does.

Sex is the basis of life and everybody is interested in it either consciously or unconsciously. It has been the basic theme of all my plays and pictures, and my characterizations symbolize the same. Because I portray sex with humor and good nature instead of something shameful, I think my portrayals are accepted in the spirit in which I play them. I have excited and stimulated, but I have never demoralized.

I feel as an actress and playwright I have been frank and honest in dealing with the subject—as I know you have been as a scientist. I cannot see sex as a tragedy in human life except, of course, in those cases where a psychiatrist—or actual restraining from sex violence of one sort or another—is needed. But I believe the more we are prepared to accept sex in our lives without a distorting sense of guilt and fear the less tragic will be any of its consequences.

A large portion of your book is devoted to presenting startling facts as to the amazing percentage of homosexuality in the total male population. In the same year I produced my play *SEX*, I also wrote and produced a play I called *THE DRAG*. This dealt seriously with the problem of the homosexual in modern society, and it was well received by thinking and forward-looking people. However, it carried a message a little too premature for the general public.

Elsewhere in your book I find that you give a "third possible interpretation of sex as a normal biological function acceptable in whatever form it is manifested."

I am afraid that right here I'm going to have to object to any interpretation of sex that looks upon it as a mere "biological function." Any man (or woman) who has anything but ice water trickling through his arteries does not want to think of sex in any terms that do not include the psychology of romance, the mystery of allurements, the excitement and adventure of discovering the unknown in the personalities of those he chooses to love.

We should know everything about ourselves, but it is wiser (for sex's sake) not to know everything about each other. We should not be so exposed to each other, so common to each other, that sex

becomes a mere commodity to be handed around like a pack of cigarettes.

How honest can we get about sex? I suppose it would be dangerous to admit that, at its best, sex is fun. But I would hasten to add that, at its worst, sex is self-destructive and criminal. There must be a happy medium—a common ground—where sex can meet with self-respect and unite to produce peace of mind for every individual.

Since one must be able to live in harmony with oneself before being able to live in harmony with others, the sooner one draws up an accounting of the sexual needs of one's character (privately, of course), the sooner will one be able to arrive at a sane and workable balance.

I would be the last to encourage uncontrolled sexual activity, licentiousness, in anyone. Obviously, early and thorough sex education and intelligent and sympathetic religious guidance are needed to enable men and women to accept and adjust the patterns of their sex lives so they may experience their basic human needs with dignity and self-respect.

Perhaps, Dr. Kinsey, you will say that all this doesn't sound much like Mae West talking—not the Mae West of the world-wide publicized sex personality. It happens to be Mae West thinking out loud. Your book about men, you know? I found it stimulating!

Sexationally yours,

Mae West

I want to parade here on a verbal runway a section for women who want to be sexually alluring to men. Beauty and sex appeal for women—what makes it? How to get it? How to keep it as long as you live?

You can have neither beauty nor a long life without good health. *Camille* was beautiful until she went around coughing up a storm; she didn't stay around longer than the third act.

Beauty is something that must be built from the inside out.

It can't be acquired simply by smearing a lot of advertised nonsense on your face. Makeup is not beauty. When artfully applied, it merely enhances what's already there—the red paint on the fire engine.

On the physical side, women can attain beauty by *not neglecting* the following:

HEALTH	FEET
REST	HAIR
DIET	MAKEUP
TEETH	COMPLEXION
EXERCISE	PERSONALITY
SEX APPEAL	

Diet, exercise, and rest in the right proportions make a good solid combination for anyone who wants to look young and beautiful and stay that way.

The right kinds of food and daily exercise and refreshing sleep are needed if one is to acquire beauty and keep it. Too many parties, late hours, and overdoing the cigarettes and cocktails will gradually leave their marks on you until, when you reach old-age-pension time or Social Security (if you do), you will look more like Whistler's Mother than you will be whistled at.

What have I done about these things through the years, so that today I am able to look and feel less than half my age?

A woman should resolve as early as possible in life to make the very most of whatever delightful natural advantages she may have in the way of face and figure, and resolve never, never to let herself go into slovenly decline. What is important to know is that every woman can have her own kind of beauty, if she's willing to look for it and try for it. Men like so many things.

My message to you is to emphasize that, in order to get and keep good looks and youthfulness of mind and body all the days

of your life, you will have to decide at some point in your life—the earlier the better—that you will follow systematically a carefully thought out program of health and beauty care, every day, every year.

That may sound like a form of slavery. It isn't once you have mastered the details of your program and practiced them until they become routine. You will have established a set of good habits which you will automatically perform as easily as breathing. Be very strict with yourself until your health and beauty program has become a well-established pattern in your life. Then it will be like second nature to you and the results will be very rewarding.

I became keenly aware, at twenty, of what could happen to youth and beauty if a woman didn't go all out in her efforts to care for and preserve them. I told myself then: I will never let that happen to me. I was very positive about it. I have taken every care, used every precaution, that it should not happen to me.

I have always enjoyed such good health that I've never thought much about it. Mother had always seen to it that I had proper food and rest, and Father, who was an athlete, taught me a lot of exercises which I liked to do. All this, with the dancing I did in those days, kept me in top condition.

I looked into the family medical encyclopedia, and by the time I got through inspecting that massive volume, I had a pretty frightening idea of all the things that could go wrong with one's vital organs. I made up my mind always to keep my guard up where my health was concerned.

If you travel a lot, or if the water in your town isn't rich in the important minerals, add bottled water for drinking purposes to any program you adopt for health and beauty's sake.

Natural teeth are a prime asset to real beauty. I have all my own natural teeth.

Dr. N. Louis Beesemyer, of Beverly Hills, has been my dentist

since I first came to Hollywood in 1932, and thanks to him, my teeth are in this amazingly perfect condition.

So see your dentist often—at least once a year, hmm?

Every woman should have a small private world of her own. When Mother decided she wanted to replace her bedroom furniture, and get rid of her old set, I raised such a sensational to-do she moved it all into my room. There I was, a young child with a room full of grown-up bedroom furniture. I was happy! I could pose and try on hats to my teenage heart's delight.

Hats have been almost a passion with me all my life. They are probably my only real extravagance, because one seldom wears a hat, especially in California. But I have always owned more hats than one head could ever possibly wear. I have had shelves and boxes filled with hats that I never wear outside the room they are in. I take them out of the closet and amuse myself for an hour or so trying them on before the mirror, and then put them away again. I find this a pleasant and relaxing pastime. It may have some psychological meaning. I have never bothered to analyze it. Why try a headshrinking technique on anything so delightful?

Everyone should get plenty of sleep to look and feel well. But don't overdo it. The number of hours that let you wake up feeling rested, refreshed, ready to be up and doing, is the right amount for you. If you seem to require an extraordinary amount of sleep and yet feel soggy, you probably have a physical problem that needs diagnosis by a doctor, or some deep emotional problem you're not anxious to face; in which case some expert psychological probing seems indicated.

It may be only your bed that's the villain. Not any old family bed, nor for that matter just any new over-advertised bed, is a guarantee of perfect rest for you. You may have to experiment until you find the right bed for *you*, one that allows you to sleep well for a normal number of hours and lets you get up feeling fine.

I have never been able to sleep with anyone (!). I require a full-size bed so that I can lie in the middle of it and extend my arms spread eagle on both sides without their being obstructed.

Looking into the relative food values of flesh, fish and fowl, eggs, milk, and the various fruits and vegetables, I came to the conclusion that "You really are what you eat." I have never knowingly eaten anything that wasn't good for me in nutritional value. I have enjoyed candy, pastries and rich desserts on occasion, but only rarely and as treats; never as part of my regular diet.

Eating solid foods when you are feeling nervous or are under tension for any reason is sheer disaster to your stomach's digestive processes. You will have a bad case of indigestion, which will serve only to increase your nervous tensions. In such instances, I avoid eating a solid meal. Often, I will have a steak prepared and the juice drawn off, which I drink, skipping the meat.

Ordinarily, for perfect diet health (if you are not trying to lose weight) you can eat almost any food of good quality provided it is *not fried*. My rule is *no fried foods and no fats*.

Does none of this sound very romantic? Does all this seem material and ordinary? Have I become a peddler of practical cures when you want passion and emotional experiences? Never mind—*this* comes first.

Everyone should have a family physician in whom he has complete confidence, and should see him at regular intervals for check-ups. Dr. Carlyle Imerman, of Beverly Hills, has been my personal physician for thirteen years, and the family doctor as well.

If you want to lose weight, do not undertake any diet whatever without your doctor's advice. Right diet and the right amount of rest have to be balanced with a certain amount of regular daily exercise if you are to keep your body youthful in shape, texture and flexibility for the long pull over the years.

No doubt some housewives will exclaim: "Exercise! I get enough exercise keeping house, making beds, getting meals,

washing dishes, sweeping and cleaning and doing laundry, looking after the kids. . . ."

When I speak of exercise, I mean the daily repetition of sets of specific exercises designed to develop or maintain muscle tone in the various parts of the body, and to strengthen organs that tend to become relaxed with the passage of time, or from the effects of childbearing.

There are any number of exercises that will keep your body supple and your flesh firm; exercises that will strengthen your neck and keep your chin line and jaw muscles taut and cleancut; exercises to keep your hips, thighs and legs trim and young. And, very important, there are things you can do to make and keep your breasts firm and lovely in contour.

In my teens I began to take special care of my breasts. The painter Degas called breasts "the eyes of the torso." I regularly massaged mine with cocoa butter every night, and sometimes in the morning, too. Afterward, I would spray or bathe them with cold water. This treatment made them smooth and firm, and developed muscle tone which kept them right up where they were supposed to be. Once the healthy structure of the bust is well established, it is not necessary to carry on the treatment too regularly. There are also exercises that are effective in raising and developing the bust.

Perhaps my early interest in developing beautiful breasts was inspired by a rumor circulating in the family when I was a child that my paternal grandmother possessed *three* well-formed breasts.

Personally, I have managed rather well with only two.

The exercises I have mentioned needn't occupy much of your time, but you must do them regularly to get any benefit from them. Your bookseller or librarian can refer you to excellent books on body building and keeping fit that will show you what exercises to do and how to do them.

Most women, it seems, have trouble with their feet. You have

heard the moss-grown cliché that "when your feet hurt, you hurt all over." Like many timeworn statements, it is profoundly true. There are reflexes in the feet that affect practically all of the vital organs, glands and nerve centers in the body. The old stage gag of the doctor looking down a patient's throat and saying, "You have fallen arches" isn't so far off after all.

When I was twenty, very short vamp shoes came into style. I wore a pair and nearly went mad. I have never worn any but long vamp shoes since. Be kind to your feet.

Very little needs to be said to the modern woman, I think, about the care of her hair, hands, complexion and the need for discretion in the use of makeup and good taste in her clothes. These are the things with which she daily faces the world, and they also are things for which she is a constant target with specialized advice and the advertising of beauty products and clothing stylists.

To attain real hair beauty, you should make it a rule to wash your hair in soft water. Many shampoos have water-softening properties, but it is not the same thing as using water that is naturally soft. A lemon rinse is good for blondes; and a diluted vinegar rinse will do the trick for brunettes and redheads.

Your face, too, will benefit by washing in soft water. Hard water usually has calcium and other mineral deposits which are drying to your skin. Keep this in mind if you are having difficulty with your complexion.

Have an arrangement of mirrors where you can see the back of your head, and also a full length mirror in which you can view the back of your dress. Remember you aren't always coming, you are also going away from. And often the rear view can be quite as spectacular as the front one. At least you should try to look good back there from head to heel.

And get that rewarding attitude of "I can do anything you can do, better." That doesn't mean you should attempt things that are obviously beyond your mental or physical capacities. Be ready

and willing to accept new challenges on the levels that you are equipped to handle; keep an open and flexible mind responsive to new ideas and new ways of doing familiar things better.

Get with the beat. Don't say, "Elvis Presley is for kids." Say, "That's for me." I'm sayin', "Live, girl—all your life. Rock with the rock and roll with the roll."

If you don't want to be a bop character, you don't have to. Just keep spring in your heart and be an acceptable contributor to the blood bank. Cultivate serenity of mind as far as possible. I grant you that isn't easy in these uneasy times.

Ask yourself, "Where's my sense of humor?" If you can find one little piece of it, enough to make you smile, you'll take the heat off any situation and save wear and tear on your nervous system and digestion.

Avoid arguments as you would the plague. If the only way you can prevent them is to walk away from them, then walk.

Now we've got the practical motor tune-ups out of the way, let's go to the races, the human races. And that member called the male animal, the lover, actor, citizen and partner in passion, and the problem child of every woman over the age of fifteen.

I've known not too many men, just many MAN. They're my kind of people, even if a favorite hobby. I never set out to make men a career; it just happened that way. I had a certain something for them and the word got around.

The news that I like my men "tall, dark and handsome" was strictly for the phrasing. I like all types of men. The man I don't like doesn't exist. I was asked once to give out a news statement on what ten men I'd like to have come up and see me sometime. I said, "The world is full of terrific men. Why ten? Why not a hundred, a thousand? Not all at once, of course. The delightful possibilities stagger the overjoyed imagination."

I've talked about many men in this book without mentioning

their names. From a legal viewpoint, that's safe, and also I don't remember names well; I always remember men's faces. Names aren't too important. Anyone alive and red-blooded will answer to "I beg your pardon, were you smiling at *me*?"

There's a man for every mood, if one can create just the right mood. Not all men come to love fully trained or prepared. Just as one important woman in their life is their mother, the other can be their teacher. I have found men who didn't know how to kiss. I've always found the time to teach them. I've taught a lot of men a lot of things that never were in a book before this one.

A philosopher once said: "Love is a game any two can play," so no one should ever ask the question, "What can she possibly see in that man?" Every woman can see something that attracts her in some man; perhaps in many men, as in my case.

Most women don't like men who are too experienced in love making. I, too, don't care for the too professional lover, who prides himself on his expert technique. The ideal lover, as I've said, is the man a woman can teach something about love he never knew before, not a technical expert. It's amazing how quickly even the inexperienced men can learn four-poster fun. Any lover will improve his technique as he becomes a man of affairs, or even of one affair.

Certainly all pleasures should be taken in great leisure and are worth going into in detail; love is not like eating a quick lunch with one's hat on. I've been quoted: "I like a man what takes his time." That ain't necessarily so in all instances. On a one-lane highway every car has to judge its own speed, or it won't get there. And getting there is what's important.

Balzac said most men handle a beautiful woman the way a zoo ape handles a rare cello. Age improves a man's playing. Men who have reached forty have acquired a number of advantages still undreamed of by the leather-jacket-switchblade set who mate in hopped-up cars to rock and roll.

At forty, a good man has come of age. He has matured and ripened, though he may still be a little green in spots to give him taste. He has been through the romance mill enough to stop playing with buzz-saws unless he's a do-it-yourself fan. By the time a man reaches forty, he should know that *now* is *today*—posterity is not going to do anything for him in the wars of men and women on the linen battlefields.

Usually a man is more fascinating at forty than before. Often he has more polish, poise, charm, and more money. The last is stronger than love potion for a happy love affair. Money is of value for what it buys, and in love it buys time, place, intimacy, comfort, and a private corner alone.

A man has more character in his face at forty than at twenty. He has suffered longer, and the more love, the more suffering, the more character. He should know that opportunity knocks for every man, but you have to give a woman a ring. He should know that often a penny saved is a girl lost, and that no gentleman kisses and tells.

He should know that an ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises, and a girl in his convertible is worth five in the phonebook. But men are not realists—only women are. At forty, any previous suspicions a man may have had about women will be pretty well confirmed. However, this does not discourage a man—his ego will always win out over commonsense, and in love commonsense is never mentioned. It was the Greeks who listed love as one form of insanity.

Life often begins after dark, and I've found too much of a good thing can be wonderful.

Since my experience with Gregory Ratoff, back in 1943, I have insisted that any picture contract I sign must contain a clause for my protection that the story has to be in every way "to my satisfaction."

Fine producers, like Jerry Wald of Twentieth-Century-Fox, have come to me, convinced that they have a great story for me. I have had to turn them down because I was convinced that the stories were not just right for me. For that reason I refused *Pal Joey* when Jerry Wald offered it to me. I have turned down so many offers from him that I am almost ashamed. I like Jerry very much; he knows how to make outstanding pictures, and I would be happy to make a picture for him or for any other good producer *if*, in my opinion, the story is right for me and I have a written assurance that it will be made to my satisfaction.

For the same reason I was forced to turn down another story which has since been made into a picture, Stephen Longstreet's *The First Traveling Saleswoman*. It did not have that extra-special something that I instinctively feel and recognize in a story that tells me at once, "That's for me!"

Apparently producers no longer have the power to give the kind of guarantee I require. Motion picture business has become so complicated and sensitized that stories have to be to the satisfaction not only of the producer, but to the satisfaction of the releasing company, to the satisfaction of the moneylenders, and perhaps even to the satisfaction of whoever cleans up the cigar butts after a story conference. But to the satisfaction of the star? Oh dear, no! Let's not be naive! The star can take it or leave it.

Believe me, I'll always leave it if any picture contract I'm offered does not have that protective clause "to *my* satisfaction."

All this reminiscing and philosophizing might make one think that I have eyes only for the past. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I have not got much more than halfway toward where I want to go. And the next and last episode in my budding career may prove that.

Working on the concluding section of this book, I had a phone call. The annual awards of Oscars (those coveted statuettes of a

nude man and his weapon) for the picture industry's "bests," were to be presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at the Pantages Theatre, Hollywood. The call was from Jerry Wald of Twentieth-Century-Fox Studios.

"Mae, I'm producing the annual Academy Awards show, and I want you to be in it."

He was terribly enthusiastic. "Rock Hudson, No. 1 male box-office attraction of the industry, is to sing. I want to make it a duet—with you."

"I don't know, Jerry."

"It is estimated that ninety million will be watching."

"Ninety million what?"

"People, Mae."

"Let me think about it."

Even before I said yes, newspaper stories claimed I would be on the show. My fans began calling, wiring and writing, to find out if I actually was going to appear. An Eastern fan club of 800 members wired: "Is Mae West really going to be on the Academy Awards show?"

I told Jerry Wald, "You've got me."

"Great!" said Jerry.

"There have to be changes in the lyrics of 'Baby, It's Cold Outside,' Jerry, to adapt them to my particular personality and style of delivery."

"All right, Mae. Change it to suit yourself." And I did.

We would have less than two minutes in the show. I wasn't sure I could be ready in the short time we had to rehearse. Rock Hudson—a large chunk of man who didn't have to act, just be there—and I became used to rehearsing together. Only a hint of direction was needed, and he had it.

I said, "An ability to understand and take direction is what makes a good actor. I can understand why your looks and personality make you the top box-office male star of the entire industry."

"You're very penetrating, Miss West."

Working every day with a pianist and Charles Henderson, a song writer, we gradually got "Baby, It's Cold Outside" real cool in a hot way.

On the March evening of the awards, using a French chaise longue, I made my television debut. Oscar events are usually very stuffy. I unstuffed this one. I brought it out of the clouds of unreal rehearsed humility and down to one man and a woman.

The Los Angeles *Examiner* headlined: *Mae West, Rock, Stop Oscar Show.*

Mae West and Rock Hudson stopped the show cold. Mae, appearing in a black spangled gown, white fur and a white plume headdress, and singing "Baby, It's Cold Outside" with Rock, brought down the house.

I was a hit on the newest thing in show business—television—with my own trademark, a man in my arms.

My phone never stopped ringing for three days, and a snow-storm of letters and telegrams descended on me. I became aware that I was, whether I liked it or not, an institution.

Everybody was happy. Including myself.

And so, my friends, this is my life. All my past is really prologue. I go on and on . . .

While I have plays to be played, I will play them. While there are pictures to be made, if I like, I shall make them. And while there are men . . .

But enough said. This book has no ending. Watch for Volume Two. I love you all.

CURTAIN